

Ki Tisa 5784

March 1, 2024

21 weeks since Oct 7

It has been 21 weeks since October 7. When I think back to those first weeks after the unbelievably horrific assault of that day, I remember being immobilized, continually nauseous, totally devastated and compromised in my ability to function. I couldn't stop looking at images and reading accounts, even as they sickened me further. I think that was true for many of us. I felt simultaneously glued and crushed, and set apart from the business as usual of the world. And then, when it became clear that the bombing of Gaza was unbelievably disproportionate and lethal, when reports emerged about families losing ten or twenty people each – children, innocents– when images emerged of flattened regions, wastelands, again I was nauseous, devastated, compromised, glued, crushed. And it was around then that the reports came out about sexual violence against Israeli women. I remember in November and December walking through the world watching business as usual around me, aware that other people were not as close to this catastrophe as I was and they had the liberty to live their lives basically unmolested by the images and the stories.

Now, 21 weeks after October 7, as we enter the month of March, many of us have gone back to focusing on the business as usual of the world – our jobs, our childrearing, our errands and activities. Maybe you saw the op/ed last Sunday in the Times by Tali Sharot and Cass Sunstein, a neuroscientist and law professor, about habituation, the fact that the human brain is wired to accustom itself to everything in our environment that is gradual or ongoing. They cite experiments that prove that human beings habituate to that which repeats or persists, including gross dishonesty, corruption, and immorality, including oppression, including horror. And when something that was once unacceptable becomes normal, we are ready to habituate to something worse.

This is my 16th sermon about the war, and people ask me when I'm going to start speaking about something else. But there are still 130 hostages somewhere under or in Gaza, undergoing who knows what torture. There are still 1.5 million Palestinian people in Rafah without sanitation, food, clean water, medical care, housing, on the edge of starvation and disease, being bombed and in danger of tanks rolling in – most of whom fled there from their homes elsewhere in Gaza on Israeli orders. And yesterday, in northern Gaza, it seems that Israeli tanks opened fire on starving people who were trying to get food that was being thrown off of the back of trucks in aid convoys. More than 100 people died and 700 were injured. The IDF says most people were trampled to death, and maybe many were, but you can see in drone footage people ducking for cover and you can hear gunfire in video footage. The editorial team of Haaretz is calling for a full investigation and argues that “even before the details of what happened have been fully clarified, these unnecessary deaths highlight the anarchy that Israel’s partial occupation of Gaza has created, in the absence of any civil authority that would see to the residents’ needs and enable them to return to their destroyed towns and villages.” “Consequently,” the editorial team continues, “the time has come to halt the offensive operations in Gaza... instead, Israel must try as quickly as possible to finalize the proposed deal with Hamas...a lengthy cease-fire and the release of Palestinians imprisoned in Israel in exchange for the return of the Israeli hostages held by Hamas.” “Before Gaza turns into Somalia...” the Haaretz editors conclude, “It’s time now to stop.”

As many of you know, in the weeks after October 7th I fully supported Israel’s right to defend itself and seek to both bring back the hostages and dismantle Hamas. As it became clear that Israel’s bombing campaign was disproportionately killing innocent civilians, I called again and again for restraint, precision, and an end to all indiscriminate killing. In December, as it became clear that Israel could not defeat Hamas through a ground war and Palestinian casualties were astronomical, I called for an immediate negotiated hostage release and end to the war. I still believe that Hamas must be defeated, but not this way. And now the call for a bilateral ceasefire with hostage and prisoner release has never been more urgent. As they

approach their 150th day in captivity, every passing day means more danger for Israeli hostages, more dead soldiers, and more senseless tragedies for Palestinians. What happened yesterday must not happen again. The tanks have got to come out of Gaza. The hostages must come home. Gaza needs a non-Israeli civil administration that can care for the people. People there need food and water and health care and toilets and to be able to go home and rebuild.

Continued war and Israeli occupation of Gaza will be an unmitigated disaster. Dahlia Scheindlin, an Israeli political analyst and public opinion expert in Tel Aviv, wrote an op/ed in the Times this week in which she pointed to the illusions that Israelis have become habituated to through Netanyahu's promise that "they can have it all." His claim since October 7th is that the military campaign can both destroy Hamas and bring their loved ones home. It is not possible to have both, and this is only the latest, Scheindlin writes, in sets of "logically irreconcilable pairs" that Israelis have clung to for decades. For example, the idea that Israel can permanently occupy Palestinian areas and remain a Jewish state with a Jewish majority is an irreconcilable pair. And the idea that Israel can be an occupying power and still be a democracy is an irreconcilable pair. And, Scheindlin writes, "the most violent myth of all holds that Israel can stifle Palestinian freedom forever, while living in peace."

She conducted a poll last summer in which a stunning 88 percent of Jewish Israelis aged 15-21 agreed with the statement: "Israel can be a democratic state even though it controls [Palestinian areas], where Palestinians cannot vote in Israeli elections." Netanyahu, like Trump, knows that when you repeat lies enough times, people believe them. People can be habituated to anything.

Scheindlin says, "After Oct. 7, the falsehood that Israel can have it all regarding security has been exposed. It is not possible to suffocate and sideline Palestinian self-determination, bask in regional normalization, and also live with a reasonable level of peace. And yet, many Israelis are reaching the opposite conclusion: Even before the war, surveys showed

that just a minority of Israelis supported a two-state solution; during the war, that portion has declined further.”

I have spoken many times since October 7 of false binaries. Having to choose between being pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian is a false binary. There are two peoples living in the land, two peoples with real, legitimate history there, two peoples who deserve freedom, self-determination, and safety. The only moral position is to be both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian, even as we loudly and clearly protest their governments.

But just as there are false binaries there are also false pairings. As Scheindlin said, occupation of Palestinians and a Jewish state with a Jewish majority are a false pairing – they don’t go together. Occupation and democracy are another false pairing – they don’t go together. You can’t run a society with two separate sets of laws for two populations and deny one of those populations the vote, and call yourself a democracy. And eventually the anti-democratic laws and practices to which the society habituates through occupation end up leading to things like judicial reform. It’s either occupation or democracy. There are real choices to be made.

In our parasha, Ki Tisa, we see a stark choice between the mishkan and the golden calf. Moses is up on Mount Sinai receiving instructions from G-d for the construction of the Tabernacle or mishkan, the meeting place between the people and G-d, when “

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי־בִשָּׁשׁ מִשֶּׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן־הָהָר וַיִּקְהֵל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם | עֲשֵׂה־לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ כִּי־זָה | מִשֶּׁה
הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה־הָיָה לוֹ:

When the people saw (or feared) that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that fellow Moses—the man who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.”

וַיִּקַּח מִיָּדָם וַיִּצַר אֹתוֹ בַּחֶרֶט וַיַּעֲשֶׂהוּ עֵגֶל מִסֹּכָה וַיִּיאֲמְרוּ אֵלֶּה
אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

He took [their golden earrings] from them and cast [them] in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

Medieval commentator Chizkuni says, “the whole people at this point were being tested by G-d as to their sincere belief in a G-d Who is and remains unseen and devoid of tangible dimensions.”

Rabbi Kolin helped me to see this week that the choice between the calf and the mishkan is like choices that we have to make in our world now. The calf is a simple, shiny object, tangible, solid, easy to make, and reassuring. The people made it because they were afraid and wanted something to protect them and save them. But the calf cannot protect them or save them. On the other hand, the mishkan is not simple or shiny but it is textured and complex. It is difficult to make but everyone is invited to participate. It is not solid but has empty space at the center. That empty space is dedicated to a G-d that is invisible and intangible, a G-d that stands for truth, justice, freedom, and peace. And unlike the calf, which is too heavy to move, the mishkan is designed to be moved, to accompany the people on their journey, to keep freedom and justice and peace in their midst, to stay with them and guide them as they find their way.

Naturally, because they are terribly afraid, the people at first choose the golden calf. It's the easier choice, because it's solid and tangible – it seems more real, it seems like it will protect and save them, but it is a false idol. When they realize that it is a false idol they turn to building the mishkan, the more complex answer that has at its center the intangible, the unknown. It is less reassuring, but it is the only thing that might save and protect them.

Like our ancestors once were, Israelis now are terribly afraid. I spoke to an Israeli this week who said, “We are not in post traumatic stress. We are currently in trauma.” No wonder most Israelis support continuing the war in

Gaza indefinitely. Like a golden calf, this war and ongoing occupation is tangible. It has shiny weapons and brave soldiers. It seems like it will save and protect Israel, but it will not. As military experts have warned, destroying Hamas through the ground war is impossible. It is a false idol. It is a golden calf. It will only lead to more pain, more destruction, and more death. It will only lead to the death of the hostages. So I pray that like our ancestors before us, Israelis will quickly see that they must turn from the calf to the mishkan, from ongoing war and occupation to the more complex project that might actually protect and save us – bilateral ceasefire with hostage return and prisoner release, a demilitarized Palestinian administration, regional recognition and normalization, and, ultimately, two democratic states.

Netanyahu is clearly desiring to choose the golden calf of ongoing war and occupation over the mishkan of democracy, but as American Jews we must not let him sacrifice *American* democracy to that false idol as well. Our president is suffering for his loyalty to Israel, in part because he thinks we want this war. American Jews must make clear that we do not support this ongoing war and occupation, and we do support our government using all of its influence and power to get humanitarian aid in, and the hostages and the tanks out; and a path toward regional stability and democracy.

Please join me this Sunday in Union Square Park at 4 pm with Israelis for Peace NYC, as we call for immediate bilateral ceasefire. The hostages have to be the priority and the war must end.

Shabbat Shalom.