

Vayakhel 5784

March 9, 2024

Responding to Stella Dolnick and Leo King

Leo and Stella, your messages could not have been more timely or more important in the 22nd week of the war between Israel and Hamas, the week of Super Tuesday and the State of the Union address, the week when the 2024 election really began. Leo, you taught us about integrity, offering Rabbeinu Bachya's observation that the call for the people to stop bringing supplies for the construction of the Tabernacle came from the craftspeople themselves and was a sign of their integrity. They held themselves accountable to their people and to their G-d, taking nothing of the wealth for themselves. Stella, you taught about sacrifice, asking us to consider what we sacrifice. You invoked your grandmother and Alexei Navalny as exemplars of sacrifice for causes larger than themselves. It just so happens that both of their causes are related to seeking and speaking truth.

Our parasha is one of unity. Its name, Vayakhel, means to gather. It describes a people all pitching in and working together to create something greater than themselves, but unlike the Tower of Babel, which was a unified building effort to demonstrate power, the Tabernacle or mishkan is a building project requiring humility, because the design and the purpose of the mishkan are about placing an empty space at the center of the community, a space to be filled with what is intangible, with what is unknowable, with the mystery of what is beyond and within us. It was an attempt, in humility, to reach toward truth.

We are living in a time of extreme disunity. Sometimes it can feel like our public discourse has become a battle. There is a literal war in its 22nd week between Israel and Hamas. And in this country, there is profound division that permeates our schools, our workplaces, our media, our communities, even our friendships. It's a division about the war in Gaza and about the future of this country. The left and the right are reacting against

each other, becoming more extreme in response to each other – calling each other names, telling conspiracy theories about each other, exaggerating facts, outright lying, describing the other side as evil, and dehumanizing each other. To apply your question Leo, how do we stand in the midst of this battle with integrity?

First, let me say that the battle, which here so far is mostly fought in words, is in Israel and Gaza about lives. The extreme and vicious brutality of October 7th is still an open wound, an active trauma for Israelis. More than 130 people are still hostage to Hamas somewhere in tunnels or locations unknown in Gaza. And more than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed, most of whom are not Hamas. 2.2 million people are displaced, 1.4 million of whom have fled to Rafah and are currently trapped in tents between the Israeli army, the Egyptian border and the Mediterranean sea, on the brink of famine and disease outbreak, literally starving, without clean water, without health care, without homes, without toilets, without safety. They are being bombed and they are living in fear that the tanks are coming. Meanwhile, Israelis wait in fear every day for the lives of the hostages and the soldiers, their loved ones who are in Gaza to defeat a terrorist organization that committed the worst atrocities against Jews since the Holocaust.

I believe that the tragedy of this war must come to an end now. I absolutely believe that Israel has the right to defend itself and defeat Hamas. But military experts have told us that Hamas cannot be defeated this way. The tunnels cannot all be destroyed. Hamas's leadership isn't even in Gaza. And this humanitarian crisis must end. I believe that ongoing war is more dangerous to Israel's long-term security than whatever gains can be made by continuing to fight in this way. Since December, I've been calling for an immediate negotiated end to the war with full hostage release in exchange for the return of prisoners. For the last three months I avoided using the word "ceasefire" because early on it was being used by people who celebrated October 7th, or did not hold Hamas responsible, or who seek the elimination of Israel, and I did not want to be associated with that. But last week, I began using the words "bilateral ceasefire," because Israelis on

the left have begun using it, and “bilateral ceasefire” of course has the same meaning as “immediate negotiated end to the war.”

But once I said the words “bilateral ceasefire”, in my sermon last Friday, and at an Israelis for Peace protest on Sunday which was covered in the Forward, I got lots of congratulations and lots of praise for saying the word “ceasefire,” even though I’d been saying the same thing in other words for three months. I don’t want congratulations. I don’t want to say what scores me points. This moment should not be about saying the exact word that people want said. It should be about trying to save lives. It should be about trying to end misery. It should be about trying to discern what will lead to the most safety and freedom for Jews and for Palestinians when, let’s be honest, none of us are certain. It should be about trying, in the midst of the pain and the complexity, to have humility; to have integrity.

American reactions to the war have been shaped by the already divided and degraded public discourse in this country and are further contributing to the degradation of that discourse. There is immense pressure to choose a side and stick with it – to promote its messages, repeat its slogans, re-post its memes – without critically assessing whether they are true, whether they are fair, whether they reflect the complexity of the situation, whether they represent what you actually feel and believe. And by the way, many of the messages, slogans, and memes that have been out there since October 7th are antisemitic.

I’m not giving a sermon today about antisemitism. I’ve given many of those over these last months and I will give more soon. This is about the idea that reversing the degradation of the public discourse is in our immediate interest as Jews and as Americans. It’s about examining carefully the role we play in perpetuating some of these pressures to join a side, to oversimplify, to exaggerate, to reduce complexity to slogans, to speak with certainty, and to cast conflict as good versus evil.

Stella, you talked about sacrifices, and you asked us to consider what sacrifices we’re willing to make for a cause greater than ourselves, and you

gave us two examples of people— your grandmother and Alexei Navalny — who made sacrifices of significantly different magnitudes to seek and speak truth. This moment calls on all of us to make sacrifices for integrity, for the purpose of seeking and speaking truth. How do we stand in the midst of this moment with integrity?

Here are some suggestions:

- 1) We may need to sacrifice our popularity — when people we care about expect us to agree with their strongly held views, it's a terrible feeling to disappoint them. When our friends or colleagues are sharing a certain message or story, it's not easy to be the one person who doesn't go along. But if we have doubts about whether it's true or fair, or right, or represents our conscience, or is oversimplifying something complex, we shouldn't put it out into the world, we shouldn't nod along. In this moment the pressure can be immense, for teens and for adults. We want the people in our lives to be proud of us. We want them to like us. We want them to see us as we see ourselves— as compassionate and moral, just and righteous. Sometimes we have to sacrifice other people's opinions of us to do what we think is right.
- 2) We may need to sacrifice our certainty — many people around us are on one side or the other, and many people are certain that they are right. They might expect us to be certain with them. But if we want to act with integrity, we need to be curious, we need to take in information that challenges our views, and we need admit what we don't know.
- 3) This means sacrificing our comfort — this war and its the massive humanitarian crisis is extremely painful to witness. It is very difficult to tolerate that discomfort. We either want to look away or retreat into the comfort of certainty. Being confused and unsure is itself painful. Certainty provides cognitive relief. Psychologists tell us that certainty gives us a sense of confidence and security, and helps restore our

sense of control, which makes us feel safe. The courage to be uncertain requires sacrificing our comfort.

- 4) We may need to sacrifice our passivity. We know that we are in echo chambers, surrounded by arguments, images and data that reinforce what we already believe. A position of integrity requires an active approach to seeking out views and reporting from outside our world. It also means moving into action, speaking up, and using whatever power we have to try to alleviate suffering and stop harm.
- 5) Finally, we need to be prepared to sacrifice consistency. As conditions change, as we learn more, as we hear new voices, as we ask new questions, we must be willing to change our views. On October 7, I said, "We stand with Israel unequivocally." On October 14th, I spoke about Israel's right to defend itself, to pursue and dismantle Hamas, and to bring back the hostages, while also calling on both sides to see each other's humanity. By November, I was decrying the astronomical number of deaths of Palestinians and was pleading for restraint, for precision, for Israel to take every possible step to protect innocent lives. By the end of December, I was calling for an immediate negotiated end to the war, and now I'm using the word ceasefire, which I said at the time I would not use.

Some say I'm too late for each of these positions, some say I'm disloyal. I'm not the model of integrity by any means. I'm simply trying my best, with what I know, to use my voice for the long term safety and freedom of both peoples, and that is what is incumbent upon all of us. It is a false binary to say that we must be either pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian. Between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea there are roughly 7 million Jews and roughly 7 million Palestinians. Two peoples live in the land with legitimate histories there. No one is going anywhere, and all deserve to be both safe and free.

Like you taught us, Leo, like the ark of the covenant, integrity means have the same inside as outside. It means not posing or pretending or

performing or being popular. It probably means being uncertain and inconsistent and uncomfortable, but as true as we possibly can be to conscience, given what we know at any time.

And at any given moment, it means taking the position we're in and turning it into action. I invite you, all of you, to join me tomorrow in two protests. First, at 11 am there will be a march at the Naumberg Bandshell at 72nd St in Central Park protesting the 150th day of captivity of the hostages, calling for Hamas to release them and Israel to bring them home. And then at 4 pm, join me with Israelis for Peace NYC who are at Union Square every Sunday at 4, calling for a bilateral ceasefire and an end to the war.

The second verse of our parasha, the first thing Moses says to the people after gathering them, is "six days work shall be done and the seventh day will be holy... sheshet yamim te'aseh melacha."

Meor Eynayim asks why the word "work" is in the passive form? Why is it not "six days a week you shall work?" It is not a message to be passive. Rather our work in the world, he says, is meant to be an expression of Torah coming through us. We are meant to be vessels, conduits for the pursuit of truth, ever expanding and evolving truth, that comes through our beings and is expressed through our voices and the work of our hands. May we attend to being the same inside and out and sacrifice whatever is getting in the way. And may God bless the words of our mouths and the work of our hands. Shabbat Shalom.