

Yasher Koach, Naomi and Ean. It is an honor to learn from each of you as you become b'nai mitzvah this morning and you have made us so proud. Ean, you reminded us of the imperative to try to be our best selves at Passover time. That Passover always falls in the Spring, when we look ahead to even better seasons, and commit to being better versions of ourselves. And Naomi, you focused on the eternal possibility of forgiveness in Jewish tradition. Looking at the Torah reading this morning, you pointed out that even when the Israelites sin the most grievous sin with the Golden Calf, God is still able to forgive them. You reminded us that there is a force in the universe above all, that can return us to equilibrium when things get out of balance.

This latter point reminds me of a text that many of us read or sang just days ago as we concluded our Passover Seders. Chad Gadya. That otherwise perplexing Aramaic poem that sticks in our throats at the end of the Haggadah, which culminates in a deus ex machina: God blazing forth to restore order after the fire...that burned the stick...that beat the dog...that bit the cat...that ate the kid...that father bought for two zuzim.

Given the playfulness with which we approach that text, we might not realize that it actually describes a rather brutal sequence of events, after which only *God* is able to restore balance to the world. If you missed that lesson in the song, that's fair enough. Most of us are too tired by the end of the Seder, or maybe too inebriated, to consider what the song really means, and that's assuming that we even get to the end of the Haggadah.

The lyrics of Chad Gadya detail a list of misfortunes – actions and reactions – each one more violent than the one before it. Chad Gadya escalates from the bizarre but anodyne event of a cat eating a baby goat, to the latter stanzas when the angel of death appears – a harbinger of the worst possible outcome – until, at last, God comes down to slay the angel of death and save the day.

Truthfully, until this year I never thought much about Chad Gadya. But now, I can't stop thinking about it. Its depiction of a cycle of retribution and blame feels so resonant in our time, as we consider the war between Israel and Hamas, and now, the movements of protest against *either*, which have been so top of mind this past week. The idea that this side did x, so that side did y. You did this, so I must do that. Everyone pointing a finger, convinced that this all really began when that one thing happened, each side getting further entrenched. It feels like an exercise in futility that will go on forever, like the first nine verses of Chad Gadya.

It would therefore be reasonable for us to wish for God to appear from the heavens and put an end to all of it. But it may, instead, be up to *us* to end the escalation of vitriol, to find some godly part of ourselves and resist those neural pathways of reaction.

In the past week, we have followed news stories closely about the protests against Israel on college campuses. Though many of us have also protested this war, or found ourselves agreeing with the student activists who seek a ceasefire and justice for the people of Gaza, the tenor of certain protests has taken a turn that we cannot countenance. We've heard

tales of anti-Semitic slogans, inciting intifada; calling to burn down Tel Aviv; telling Jews to go back to Poland. And we've heard stories of much more graphic agitation than that. Even as we feel confident that the majority of the protests are peaceful, and do not include such slogans or chants, *and* that the students engaged in them are trying to give voice to a Palestinian people that needs advocates around the world...it would be natural for Jews, on campus and beyond, to feel threatened and afraid in the face of these outbursts. Many of you have shared your fear. And I see you. I feel it, too. And in this community, you are not alone.

As we've watched this unfold, we've also witnessed college administrations crack down on protests, enlisting the police and threatening the National Guard. We've watched student evictions and suspensions, violent arrests where students are pepper sprayed and professors are thrown to the ground. This, too, is against our values. Not only does it stand against our core belief in the right to assemble and to speak freely, especially in academic settings, it also provokes further anguish and still more protests around the country.

X leads to Y, yet again. And then and then and then. With further *reaction* from administrators and police. Like the back and forth of Chad Gadya, the campus protests, too, have escalated.

I'll be honest and tell you that this has torn me up as a rabbi, as a Jew, as an American, and as a human being. I support these students' right to protest. And insofar as they are motivated by the cause of Palestinians who yearn to breathe free, who seek dignity, and safety and a state, I agree with

them. I am inspired by young people on campus speaking their mind, especially as they seek to root out injustice. Some of my friends attended a Seder with protesters at the Columbia encampment this past week and described it as wholesome and inspiring. Seeing young Jews care so deeply about justice for Palestinians as passionately committed Jews.

That should be the headline. But instead, we have to contend with these, possibly rogue actors, but visible figures nonetheless, who inject anti-Jewish animus into this movement. Some of the stories I've heard firsthand and the videos I've seen make me sick. We have to denounce them vocally, and insist that the protest leaders do the same.

And yet as we try to do both things – supporting the rights of student activists while calling out anti-Semitism where we see it, we also have to do something even harder. We must resist the impulse to condemn the existence of the protest movement entirely or to seek, as some have, to destroy it. If we want to de-escalate the tenor of public discourse, we have to find some way of quashing anti-Semitism *without* trying to shut down the protests and becoming the next lyric of Chad Gadya. Otherwise, it will only get louder and more intense.

Picking up on this same idea, the Israeli folk singer Chava Alberstein wrote an adaptation of Chad Gadya in 1989. In the middle of the first intifada, which took the lives of 200 Israelis and nearly 2,000 Palestinians, Alberstein observed the same macabre crescendo in her time... action and reaction...and she chose to rephrase the classic text and then riff in the middle with a poem of her own:

“And why are you singing Chad Gadya?” she cries out, in the recording.

“Spring isn’t here yet and Passover hasn’t arrived. And what has changed for you, what has changed?” Using the Hebrew “mah hashtanah,” with its Pesach resonance, she continues...

“I have changed this year. For on all the nights, all the nights, I asked only four questions. This night I have another question:

How long will the cycle of horror last; the pursuer and the pursued; the striker and the stricken; When will this madness end? And what has changed for you...what has changed?” Concluding the song, she returns to that same Hebrew echo, “mah Hashtanah?”

Above and beyond this current ferment around the protests, each of us should ask ourselves...ma hashtanah? What has changed, in the thirty five years since Alberstein wrote those words? The breakdown of the Oslo Accords. Then the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Then a *second* intifada – that time claiming the lives of over 1,000 Israelis and 3,000 Palestinians. Then a wall, and ongoing occupation, and settlement construction. Then war and siege. And then, on October 7th, 1,200 of our people murdered on a single day. And then, the bombing and ground war and starvation of Gaza. Leading to the deaths of over 30,000 Palestinians. And hostages still in captivity. And *then* and *then* and...then what?

Mah hashtanah may have been the question, but the *answer* to that haggadic inquiry sounds more similar to Chad Gadya...further cycles of retribution and blame.

Perhaps the question should be phrased, mah *yishtanah*? Mah *yihyeh shoneh*? What *will* be different?

Part of why the past few weeks have been so distressing is that the campus protest movement and the backlash against it represent a continuation of the cycle. The escalation of anger in the movement, including anti-Semitic voices, and the increasingly extreme response... college commencements canceled, protesters facing skunk water that sent them to the hospital...all of these things compound, in an ongoing cascade of bitterness. And when every action prompts a *reaction*, the cycle feels interminable.

We have to resist playing out the same script. We have to write a different end to this Haggadah. We have to find some other way to root out the anti-Semitism that we see without intensifying the drama, and without abandoning other values we hold dear. That might mean making more room for common ground, or insisting on a world in which justice means freedom and dignity for *both* Israelis and Palestinians. It might mean getting a little uncomfortable. It might mean holding our own fear of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism alongside the fear and vulnerability of Palestinians in Gaza and around the world. It might mean a painful struggle to see both truths at once, less ready-made for social media. But that radical idea, increasingly passé on both the left and the right, is the only way forward.

And as we try to understand how we can respond to this moment, we have to measure our actions and selective *reaction* against that truth. Both truths, that is. Being essential to us.

I don't know how this will end. I don't know where the escalation will lead us next, or what further truths will be revealed, about the protests or the reaction to them. But I *have* to believe that there is some way out of this incessant cycle of escalation. I *want* to believe that we will find some way to end the cycle together, without adding another verse to the song. And I *choose* to believe that one day, by the grace of God, or by way of hard, decisions of human beings, there will be a just outcome in which we are no longer afraid. And in which Israelis and Palestinians live in peace.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.