

In Mitzrayim, everything was black and white. Good and evil. Moses or Pharaoh. Us or them. And that's how the story was told, and that's how Pharaoh justified his actions - we were vermin. They had power, we did not, they were human, we were barely. Part of the oppression of living in such a state is being trapped in somebody else's story about who we are. Stuck. No room for nuance. No room for coexistence or interreliance. No room to breathe. Us or them. And for a long time it was "them," and then Moses was sent by God and there were plagues and demands for our release, and for a little while there, it was "us."

But then something extraordinary and radical and new happened. On the day we went forth from Mitzrayim, when we slipped our shackles and ran to the edge of the Sea of Reeds, the narrative changed. And actually, the Torah portion we read on the first day of Passover kicks us off with this idea: "*v'gam erev rav alah itam*. Moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them." We left Mitzrayim with not just us - but a mixed multitude of people came with us. The commentator Ibn Ezra taught that this *erev rav* included Egyptians, too, who joined their caravans to ours. All who sought freedom set a trajectory for a shared liberation. It wasn't viable any longer to think in terms of good and evil, us or them. If we were going to navigate the raw nature of an unfriendly wilderness, we were all going to have to make it out, we were all going to have to have a place in the story, we were all going to need to survive. Oppression was zero sum, but freedom was expansive.

In a Mitzrayim mentality, the framework for oppression, only one people survives whole, gets freedom, safety, dignity, favor. But our exodus, *our* liberation story, is an *erev rav* mentality - not either/or, but both/and, and all in. Safety, possibility, freedom, and hope for everyone on the journey. Even if we didn't like each other, or really want to wander the next 40 years side by side, our lots were cast together and the framework for our freedom, for freedom in general, was the aspirational, and quite actual, *erev rav*. Multiple needs, multiple peoples, and discerning a way for multiple existence.

Right now, on college campuses across our country, protesters are at risk of perpetuating a Mitzrayim mentality, even as many of them are, I feel certain, trying desperately to turn the world's attention to freedom and help for the most vulnerable.

Earlier this week, as many of us know, college students on Columbia University's campus gathered in a protest encampment to demand that Columbia denounce Israel's actions in Gaza and divest from companies that support or do business with Israel. By and large, the protest seems to be anti-Zionist, though it's not clear that everyone participating ascribes to that ideology. But it is clear that there is shared agreement that Israel is committing great atrocities and the participants do not want their tuition dollars to be used for this war. There are many reports from the ground that the protests are mainly peaceful, including young Jews leading a seder on Monday evening. And also, there are many documented reports of blatant and flagrant anti-semitism, hate, intimidation, and incitements to violence against Jews - students, teachers, and passersby, on campus.

On Monday, Columbia's administration called in the NYPD, who arrested more than 100 students for trespassing and other related infractions. This action triggered additional protests and encampments on more than 40 campuses around the country - and growing - in solidarity with the students who they felt had been unfairly arrested, and with a similar set of demands around divestment from Israel. Columbia's administration moved classes online or hybrid between now and graduation, issuing suspensions for arrested students. According to the New York Times, more than 400 protesters, mainly students, have been arrested across the country this week.

This moment is nothing if not complex, with the Jewish people, and everyone, watching it unfold in the press, the left and the right developing theories about what is actually happening in these protests, who is funding and instigating them, are they student-led or is this coming from an outside body, and whether the antisemitism being expressed is coming from the core base of protesters or is just, as protest leaders are saying, a few rogue voices. And perhaps, amid all of these unknowns, what is weighing on many of us most heavily, is the question of whether this broad uprising against Israel is a harbinger of things to come - a turning point for Jews in America - and what might come next.

Among the most challenging, and also most widely shared, stories coming out of the protests are those antisemitic incidents in which Jews have been targeted or the collective chants have been violent, or threatening. A colleague's college-student child shared her experience of protesters chanting at Jewish students wearing kippot: "Yehudi, Yehudi, eff you," except of course, they didn't censor the "eff" word for bima purposes. "Yehudi Yehudi eff you." It doesn't even rhyme . . . except that it does. Yehudi is Hebrew for Jew. So I'm guessing it began as the less acceptable, Jew Jew eff you. And perhaps someone felt that crossed a line, so they said it in Hebrew instead. Let's note: Yehudi does not mean Israeli. It means Jew. Now, to hear that chanted at an Israeli would be no less disturbing and insulting, but what do these two be'kippah'ed young men have to do with Israel's aggression in Gaza?

It seems clear that many of the students are earnestly showing up at these protests for many of the same reasons that we at CBE have been crying, speaking, rallying, donating, and grieving - for the millions of innocent Palestinians on the brink of starvation, disease, and death. That many of them are trying to wake up a world to the cause of a people who desperately need humanitarian aid, safety, hope, and a state. But intimidating and yelling at Jews, things like: We are all Hamas, globalize the intifada, everyday will be October 7th for you, Burn down Tel Aviv, and go back to Poland - these are not words of peace and peace will never be achieved through them. Not for "us or them." If one insists on living in the world as "us and them."

And for the students who are saying these are outside factions, a rogue few, I can believe that. But then the job of the organizers is to distance themselves dramatically from such hatred. Clearly and loudly, to say: "that is not us, that is unconscionable," to denounce Hamas and violence, and to say: this is not about the Jewish people, even those with whom we disagree. To the students who are saying that - it's not easy and it is commendable.

And let me say: it is critical that we support the students' right to protest. In countries where they have no right to assembly or freedom of speech, the people are a lot less safe, and a lot less free. This is a sacred right in this country as we do all that we can to hold onto our own fragile democracy. We need the right to protest to be a protected right, and it is upon us to defend the right to gather peacefully even if what is being said there is odious to us. This doesn't mean no one will be arrested. Anyone threatening or harassing or inciting violence to another person - that's not peaceful assembly. And I've participated in civil disobedience and was arrested twice. Both times with our senior rabbi. The arrest is part of the drama. The police tell you to leave and you choose not to. And the arrest brings attention and headlines to your cause. Civil disobedience is a long held tradition in this country and being arrested is an expected part of that. What should not be happening on these campuses, however, is there should not be excessive force used by police, pepper spray, or the National Guard. And I think, where possible, officers should use their discretion and patience before arresting students. But if protesters break laws, they should be prepared that arrest is a likely consequence of that.

Like I said: it's such a complex moment. On the one hand, we have this protest in which students are trying to live their values and do something that matters, but woven in and between its foundation are the threads of an ancient anti-semitism in which the Jew is the target - and some Jewish students on campus are left wondering if they still have a place in their own institution of higher learning.

And on the other hand, is the message of the protests themselves. Some protests are calling for divestment from all of Israel, which I don't agree with, but is a political strategy. But at the University of Michigan protest, students are handing out fliers that call for a Third Intifada. I lived in Israel during the second intifada and I know firsthand that this is not a peaceful or political strategy. In NY Magazine this week, Jonathan Chait describes some of the central organizations leading these protests as having "a violent eliminationist stance toward Israel." He writes: "Many students were attracted to these groups because of the horrendous human toll inflicted by Israel's counterattack in Gaza. But the groups themselves are very clearly not advocating for 'peace.' They are for war. Their objection is not to human suffering, but that the wrong humans are suffering."

When I hear these protesters advocating for a violent end to Israel, I wonder if we will be stuck in Mitzrayim forever. Us and not them, ours and not their suffering. To want to violently eradicate Israel requires the decision to not see humanity in Israelis, just as to want to violently eradicate Gaza requires the decision to not see the humanity in Palestinians. These are decisions to live in an either/or world, stuck forever in the dark pits of slavery.

And let's be fair, sometimes I get stuck, too. I think about K'fir and Ariel Bibas, the youngest hostages, now held for more than 200 days, and I burn with anger. None of this is easy, but if we never leave the "us or them" of Mitzrayim, we also can never be free. And worst of all, the organizations that are calling for violence, for resistance "by any means necessary," do not ultimately help the cause of the Palestinian people, who deserve a robust and effective protest movement on their behalf.

I also feel compelled to say that groups from the Christian right showing up to counter protest, as they did last night at Columbia, or elected officials capitalizing on this moment and decrying antisemitism when it's politically beneficial - is also an expression of Mitzrayim - they just define who is Pharaoh and who is Moses in the reverse order. And it doesn't help. It is equally as cynical and disheartening.

Because freedom and safety and dignity - liberation and hope - our own redemption story is a story of an *erev rav*, a mixed multitude. And those who are calling for a violent outcome of just one winner left standing are threatening the fragile balance of this critical moment in history, this rare and fleeting opportunity, whose window is closing, to shape a reality in which there are two states for two peoples, side by side, able to breathe, build, thrive, and eventually build the trust needed to journey next to each other through this wilderness, even when it is hard. There are Israelis and Palestinians marching together in the street right now for an end to the war, for the return of the hostages, for a home for each people. For Israel's right to exist. For Palestine's right to exist. For the lives of K'fir and Ariel Bibas to matter. For the lives of the 19,000 now orphaned Gazan children to matter.

The *erev rav*, the ones who were able to turn their eyes toward a better future than what they had in Mitzrayim - they were the ones who realized that they were going to have to learn how to navigate the wilderness together.

They were the ones that figured out they'd need each other if they were going to survive - that it was never going to be just one of them, but that no one was going anywhere and they'd have to learn to contend with each other.

The ones who made it out were the ones who learned to see a bigger picture that they could be part of, if they could only learn how to coexist on their journey, if they could learn to see each other's humanity

And it is the *erev rav* now that reminds us how to weep for both the hostages, and the orphans in Gaza. It is the *erev rav* that can teach us how to dream of a future for both peoples. Even amidst the pain. Even in the hearts of students raising their voices on campuses across the country.

Rachel Polin Goldberg, the mother of Hersh Goldberg, a 24 year old Israeli American who has been captive for more than 200 days, wrote a poem from the soul of the *erev rav*. This week, Hamas released a video of Hersh in which he got to tell his family that he loves them and it was life-giving, but until this day, his mother had not known even if he was alive. And even from that magnitude of unknowable sadness and fear, she wrote these words:

There is a lullaby that says your mother will cry a thousand tears before you grow to be a man.

I have cried a million tears in the last 67 days.

*We all have.
And I know that way over there
there's another woman
who looks just like me
because we are all so very similar
and she has also been crying.
All those tears, a sea of tears
they all taste the same.
Can we take them
gather them up,
remove the salt
and pour them over our desert of despair
and plant one tiny seed.
A seed wrapped in fear,
trauma, pain,
war and hope
and see what grows?
Could it be
that this woman
so very like me
that she and I could be sitting together in 50 years
laughing without teeth
because we have drunk so much sweet tea together
and now we are so very old
and our faces are creased
like worn-out brown paper bags.
And our sons
have their own grandchildren
and our sons have long lives
One of them without an arm
But who needs two arms anyway?
Is it all a dream?
A fantasy? A prophecy?
One tiny seed.*

When it feels as if everyone has sunk back into the binary of us or them, back into an either/or world, it is world changing to talk loudly about the freedom that comes when an *erev rav* dreams up a different future, talks about it, amplifies it, writes poetry about it, and stands firm as the tidal

waves of Mitzrayim rage forth, without knocking us down. If Hersh's mother can do it, so also we can do it.

It's hard to know what to do about all this, what to do next, so I want to offer a framework from the Passover seder as we find our footing here. We open our doors during the seder with three different historical and traditional intentions throughout the night - intentions that can guide us now.

The first intention: We open the door to demonstrate our own humanity to others. Historically, we'd be accused of blood libels during Passover, suspicions rising about the ingredients in our matzah - so we'd open our doors to prove our humanity. To show that we were not vermin, not evil, not grotesque - we were just human beings, having a meal with our families. Now is a time to reveal our deepest wells of humanity.

The second intention is defiance. Historically, Passover was a time when violent neighbors would come to a Jewish home and murder the family having their seder. So we would throw our doors open in defiance of those who would threaten us, stand there without trembling knees, and dare anyone to come at us, refusing to give in to the story the world was telling about us. Now is a time to stand sure and tell our own story, refusing to be defined by hateful words.

And the third intention is unbridled hope and an offering of friendship. We open our doors to sing Eliyahu Hanavi because maybe, just maybe, our neighbors will hear us singing for a better world and maybe they will take the risk with us and open their doors, too, and there, we'll plant a seed for a different future, an *erev rav* future, a side by side future. Now is a time, if there ever has been one, to take the risk of singing out loud in the hallway for peace, until all the doors are open and the seed can begin to grow with collaboration, trust, and partnership.

May the protestors on these campuses feel filled with an *erev rav* spirit. May they come to lift up all humanity even as some in their caravan are so stuck in Mitzrayim. And may we never let go of the truths of our own redemption story. Until there is peace and hope for two peoples. For all peoples. Shabbat shalom.