

Shabbat Emor 5784  
May 18, 2024  
Last Day of Yachad

Rafaela and Akiva, you wrote beautiful divrei Torah sensitizing us to animal life. It's true that our ancestors sacrificed animals as a way to draw near to G-d. Rafaela, you point out a contrast between the laws in Torah that are compassionate toward animals and those that command killing animals for sacrifice. Akiva, you teach that the sacrifices were a way to transcend idol worship, and you argue that animal sacrifice is unnecessary now and will be unnecessary in the future because we have found other ways to communicate with G-d. Both of you make the case for a deeper sensitivity to the feelings and the lives of animals. Rafaela, you talked about your bond with your horse Mocha, you both talked about your relationship with your dog Paddington, and Akiva, you talked about scientific discoveries that point to animal sentience and cognition that indicate that animals might be more similar to human beings than we think.

I like to think that we are evolving toward greater sensitivity to life in all of its forms, and your divrei Torah are pushing us in that direction. The Rabbis of the Talmud agree with you that animal sacrifice is no longer needed, saying that Torah study itself can replace the sacrifices. They say in Masechet Menachot: "Whoever studies the sacrifices it is as if they had offered one." Hasidic master Meor Eynayim takes it even further – he says that everyone who serves G-d can be likened to the *kohanim*, the priests who performed the sacrifices. But since serving G-d isn't about animal sacrifice anymore, Meor Eynayim teaches, what it really means to be like a *kohen* or a priest, the people who offered the sacrifices, is that you are a descendent of Aaron, who was the high priest. And to be a descendant of Aaron means your job is to work for peace. In Pirkei Avot (1:12) the Sages say "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and promoting peace, loving people and bringing them near to Torah." Therefore, Meor Eynayim says, anyone who claims to serve G-d, must also love peace and promote peace.

Today I want to give a message to you, Rafaela and Akiva, and your family and friends, and also to all of our Yachad families who are here for the very last day of Yachad. I was in Israel last week, and I met many descendants of Aaron. I spoke about this trip last week, but this week I want to tell you about the people who claim to be the descendants of Aaron and the people who I think really are the true descendants of Aaron. Here are some of the true descendents of Aaron: We met the staff of Physicians for Human Rights, an Israeli organization that is working tirelessly to try to provide medical care to Palestinians. We met with Brit Yakobi, the co-founder of Smol Emuni, an organization of religious Israeli Jews who are bringing their faith into the public discourse in Israel to demonstrate that it is religious to care about co-existence, it is religious to care about shared society, and it is religious to care about peace. We met with leaders of Omdim BeYachad/Standing Together, Gisha, Shovrim HaShtika/Breaking the Silence, Rabbis for Human Rights, the Israel Religious Action Center, and Land for All, who are working for shared society, human rights, equality, justice, and peace. We met with survivors of October 7th who said that their commitment to peace has not changed, that the only way forward is peace. We met with Knesset Member Gilad Kariv, of the Labor Party, who is speaking out strongly and courageously in the Knesset, from the government, about the need for a Palestinian state and two state solution. We met with Nidal Foqaha of the Palestinian Peace Coalition and Varsen Aghabekhian, of Bridging Insights, an organization of Palestinians and Israelis seeking to resolve the conflict from a new angle, by mapping stakeholders of both societies and doing shared learning from other conflicts around the world about what will bring Israelis and Palestinians to peace.

As we saw bitterly on October 7th and since, there are forces in the Palestinian world who are not seeking peace: Hamas, Hizbollah, Iran, Islamic Jihad, and others are seeking to kill or remove the Jewish people from the land, and are very ready to use violence to do so. They must be stopped, they must be removed from power. Just yesterday we got news that the bodies of hostages Shani Louk, Izhak Gelerenter, and Amit Buskila

were recovered in Gaza. We stand with their families in their terrible grief, and pray fervently for the return of all hostages now.

I and many others have been calling urgently since December for a negotiated release of the hostages in exchange for an end to the war, and for a negotiated security agreement for a safe Israel and an established Palestinian state with the help of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries. The leader of J Street in Israel, Nadav Tamir, said that he believes that this is the moment for a negotiated security agreement. He said, "We've never had a bigger tragedy and we've never had a bigger opportunity. I don't believe that there is anything more important to Israel and the Jewish people than a two state solution, and I don't remember a time when a two state solution was so concrete. All of the paradigms that told us it was impossible were crushed on October 7: the idea that you could maintain the situation [the occupation of the West Bank and the blockade of Gaza] and not solve it, the idea that you could rely on the military and don't need diplomacy, the idea that we don't need the US, the idea that the most right wing government in Israel is what will bring security. All of these paradigms have been shattered," Tamir said. "Now it's clear that there's no democracy with occupation. As Israelis move through our trauma and become more rational, we are seeing that this is true. Now the US government is talking about two states very clearly. Our conflict is spilling over to affect the world, including US politics, which gives the US big motivation to act. Now we have international consensus except for Iran, Hamas, and Bibi. This is the time for US intervention, this is the time when a negotiated security agreement that gives Israel safety and gives Palestinians a state, is the most realistic option."

This negotiated agreement would take Hamas out of power and replace them with other Palestinian leadership. Marwan Barghouti, who is sitting in Israeli prison, but who has renounced violence and supported a two state solution loudly and clearly from prison for more than a decade, and who says that he would agree to a demilitarized Palestinian state, is the clear favorite of Palestinians. On our trip we met with Khalil Shiqaqi, a Brandeis professor who is the most respected Palestinian pollster. Since 1993, he

has taken over 200 polls of the people in Gaza and the West Bank. He said two very important things. 1) As of March, 63% of Gazans support a two state solution. 2) Marwan Barghouti leads all other Palestinian leaders, including the leaders of Hamas, by more than 20 points in all polls of Palestinians as the person they want to lead the Palestinian state.

All of us want safety for the Jewish people. The question is what will make us safe. Efforts to prevent a Palestinian state have not made us safe and will not make us safe. Attempts to take all of the land for Jews are endangering us right now.

As you noted, Akiva, there are Jews who believe what Maimonides said in the Mishneh Torah, "The King Messiah will arise and re-establish the monarchy of David as it was in former times. . . . [and] Sacrifices will be offered . . . as commanded in the Torah." Some Jews are working hard right now to bring about that time. They think that the way to bring back the descendants of Aaron and the animal sacrifices of the Temple, is to claim all of the West Bank and Gaza for Jews, and to remove all of the Palestinians from their land, and many of them are using violence to do so. There was a long investigative report in the New York Times on Thursday quoting current and retired Israeli officials about violent extremist settlers who are working for that messianic vision, who are breaking the law with impunity, who are often supported and defended by the Israeli police, the Israeli military, and Israeli government officials, and who are increasingly themselves in positions of power within the Israeli government.

Now, Rafaela and Akiva, your dad, Alex, has urged me to be very careful to check my sources when speaking about Israel, and I want to reassure him and all of you that I have verified part of this article with my own eyes.

When I was in Israel last week, I went to the village described in the New York Times article, the village of Khirbet Zanuta in the South Hebron Hills, which is just down the hill from an illegal settlement outpost called Meitarim led by Yinon Levy, a man who the Biden administration has singled out for financial sanctions because he has used violence and intimidation to push Palestinians off their land. Standing in the remains of Khirbet Zanuta, I saw

the wreckage of what was once a community. I walked through the school building that is now destroyed, and though the ceiling is caved in, half the walls are gone and there is debris everywhere, there are still tiny handprints in paint on the wall made by the children. The houses all around are rubble and ruins, with only fragments of walls standing. The people of Zanuta say that they gathered up their belongings and fled their homes after they were attacked and beaten, and after they were threatened with death.

Last night here at CBE, we held our Hope for Our Future award dinner. Here at CBE we observe Yom HaAtzmaut, Israeli Independence Day, by giving an award to people and raising money for organizations who are fighting for a future in Israel that gives us hope. Last night we gave our Hope for our Future award to Rabbi Noa Sattath and ACRI, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the oldest and largest civil rights organization in Israel, who, among many many other things, are defending the people of Khirbet Zanuta. CBE, our community, raised \$23,000 for their vital work. There are so many Israelis who are doing incredible work for a future that has hope, a future of equality and justice for all the people who live in the land.

The people who want to reinstate the age of the priesthood, the people who want to see the animal sacrifices of the kohanim begin again in a rebuilt temple, are missing a very important part, an essential part, of that vision. To be disciples of Aaron, they must, by definition, love peace and promote peace.

They need to learn from Maoz Inon, a true disciple of Aaron. Maoz is a businessman. He grew up in Netiv HaAsara, a moshav right on the border of Gaza. On the terrible day of October 7th, when the terrorists of Hamas paraglided into the moshav and killed 20 people, both of his parents were murdered. Many of his childhood friends were killed. He cried as he told us this story.

His mom was an artist who made mandalas, some of which were painted on the walls of the moshav, beautiful artwork, and Maoz shared with us one of the inscriptions on one of the mandalas. It said, "All of our dreams can be fulfilled if we have the courage to chase them." His dad, Maoz told us, was a farmer who taught his kids by example that you never give up, that you start again after every hard season. They, his parents, are his inspiration now, he says. Maoz and his siblings held shiva starting on October 8th. It was the first shiva in all of Israel after that terrible day. And right then, that very day, his family put out a message to the world. "We don't want revenge."

He said that hope is an action like love. You have to create it. It starts by dreaming of a better future and then turning that dream into action. He said, "We forgot to dream. We must not underestimate the power of dreaming." He said, "I decided not to wait for the future of my dreams to arrive, but to already start living in that future now: a future of equality and dignity, a future of shared acknowledgement and recognition, a future of security and safety." He said, "I have a beautiful life. I cry a few times every day but I'm very happy." He said with certainty, "By 2030 there will be peace between the river and the sea. We are the leaders of the future, no one else."

May it be so. May Maoz and all of the true descendants of Aaron, prevail. And may we be descendants of Aaron too, by doing our part to support the people who live in the land who, despite their trauma, through their grief, are dedicating their whole lives to create hope for our future. May we never, ever give up on them. May we love peace. May we use all of our power here, in our country with our government, to promote peace in Israel and Palestine. May we see peace in our time.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.