

Acharei Mot 5784

May 3, 2024

On the college encampments

Our parasha this week, Acharei Mot, begins with a brief recounting of the death of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, who died “*bkaravtam lifnei Adonai*, in their drawing near to G-d.” The commentators are trying to understand why they died. The problem seems to have been, as Hasidic master Meor Eynayim and others interpret it, that Nadav and Avihu were so enamored with the divine light that they focused entirely on ascending to the higher reaches, forgetting that the whole purpose of going up is to come down in order to bring blessing to the earth. Their job was not the attainment of their own spiritual purity or elevation. Their job was to reach upward so that they could bring blessing to real living people on the ground who needed it.

I feel compelled tonight to speak to young people on college campuses. I also want to speak to the adults who have young people in their lives who they're worried about. And I want to speak to all of us who are reacting to what we are seeing.

I don't know how many people who are sitting in encampments tonight or are supporting them will hear me, but I want you to know that I believe in your right to protest, and I know how much courage it takes to risk your academic careers, your safety, and a certain kind of respectability. I know many of you are out there protesting because you cannot tolerate seeing the extreme suffering of Gazans and feel you must try to help. I am with you in that feeling, and I know that if I was a student on your campus, a part of me would wish that I could join you in your protests. But I have to admit to you that some of what is happening in these encampments is frightening me, not only personally as a Jew, but as someone who cares about what happens to Palestinians, and Israelis, and as someone who cares about what happens in the United States. I wonder if I can say

something tonight that could reach you, that could help us find some common understanding.

You are accomplishing something extraordinary. Those of us who have dedicated our lives to justice, freedom, and human dignity dream of building a movement that spreads, that inspires, that captures the attention of the world. Seeing the messages of gratitude on the tents in Gaza, hearing the interviews with Palestinians in which they thank you, you see that you reached them in their living nightmare, you made them feel less alone in the world, you showed them that their lives matter and that you are fighting for them.

I see those of you who are Jewish trying to take the highest values of Judaism and put them into action. You know that our central defining narrative is the Exodus, just told at Passover, in which our experience of enslavement has a purpose, and that purpose is explicitly to demonstrate that the G-d of the universe is on the side of freedom and justice, and that that G-d expects us to translate our experience of degradation into a moral duty to oppose the enslavement of others, and to be active voices for liberation.

You are desperate to end the occupation of Gaza and the Palestinian people. I am with you. I have been opposing the occupation since the 1990's. You are affronted, nauseated, crushed, by the starvation of millions of children, by mothers giving birth on the ground and lacking the calories to nurse their babies, by families losing *one hundred relatives* under bombs and under rubble, by thousands of wounded children undergoing amputations without anesthesia. If you are Jewish you are ashamed to have anything to do with this Israeli government that is numb, indifferent, hate-soaked and perpetrating these crimes. The idea that this is done in your name is intolerable to you. You are out there because you are trying to use your body and your voice, and every bit of privilege you have, to stop it.

And not just stop it. You want freedom for the Palestinian people. You want them to have their own country with their own government, with no one hurting them and no one controlling them. I want that too.

But is your message helping them? Think about what Palestinians actually need right now. You have the world's attention. Can you use your platform to help the people living in Gaza?

Many voices in and around your encampments have been advocating for the death of Zionists, or have been praising Hamas, or have been calling for October 7th to happen again and again, or have been calling for intifada and praising martyrs, or have been fantasizing about burning Tel Aviv to the ground. I know that there are forces trying to co-opt what you are doing. I know that you can't control everything that gets said in and around your protest. I imagine that many of you are uncomfortable or even ashamed to be associated with these voices. I know that most of you understand that Hamas is a terrible, dangerous force that is actively victimizing the Palestinian people right now as much as it seeks to murder Jews. I know you do not celebrate murder. I know for many of you, your vision for freedom is for all people.

Do not forget that you have a voice. You have social media, you have posterboard, you can make statements, you can make sign-on letters, you can contact the press, you can make clear what you do and do not stand for. The media will look for the most outrageous messages, so if you wish to dissent from these violent, maximalist, eliminationist voices, you must do so loudly, clearly, unequivocally.

If you are trying to do this now, we cannot hear you. Be louder. Be clearer. Keep trying.

This matters immensely. You have a tremendous opportunity to change the world right now, but the opportunity is being missed. The hate in your encampments is making them easy to dismiss.

I understand that it might feel impossible to disagree. Ahmned Fouad Alkhatib, a Palestinian leader in Los Angeles who visited the UCLA encampment, posted on social media: “there was no room or space for bringing different views about the protests or the issue, as everybody was either on the same page or there was almost complete conformity with regard to the opinions that protesters espoused about Zionism, Israel, Gaza, etc...The slogans, goals, and ethos are based on maximalist, zero-sum aspirations that will never achieve anything for the Palestinian cause. It was clear that a small group of students and organizations developed their platform, and subsequently the masses are being herded into following it, seemingly mindlessly and without a deep understanding of Gaza, Hamas, Israel, foreign policy, and all the relevant issues.”

This may not describe the conditions where you are. If you have the ability to shape what’s happening where you are, the best thing you could do is to create a focused message on what Palestinians actually need right now: ceasefire, new Palestinian leadership, a Palestinian state, the release of hostages in exchange for prisoners, an end to the humanitarian crisis, an end to the war, international commitment to rebuild Gaza. Use your platform to say this, and to denounce every message of hate, every message of violence, every message that seeks the elimination of anyone. Don’t enable your hard work to be dismissed because of hateful voices. Be strategic. Be humane. When something is harmful, don’t let it go by unaddressed. Do what will actually help the Palestinian people. Use the high platform you have attained to bring blessing to the world.

This is perhaps the most important thing I can say to you: there is literally nothing worse you could do for the Palestinian people than to allow your protests to affect the US election in November. Not all outcomes of that election will be the same for Palestinians. One outcome would be truly terrible for the Palestinian people. Please be strategic.

We’re living in a time when our society is flirting with authoritarianism, when freedom of expression and the right to protest may not be here that much longer. Civil disobedience is an important form of expression, by which we

risk arrest to demonstrate our strongly held beliefs, bring attention to our cause, and to inspire others to take similar courageous action. I have been arrested eight times for civil disobedience. Arrests are part of the deal, even part of the strategy. The original Columbia University arrests galvanized the nation. I am not troubled by the police being called in and arresting people who are committing civil disobedience. However, police brutality is unacceptable. In some places the police have been exemplary, but we know we have a police brutality problem in this country. There is no reason for police to use violence against protesters unless the protesters are violent first. And therefore I urge you, if you are participating in an encampment, do not engage in violence or property destruction, and do not resist arrest. Learn how to effectively cooperate with the police when they come to arrest you. If your purpose is the freedom of the Palestinian people, there is no reason to fight your local police. Your point is made through your arrest. When your protests become violent or lawless, destructive or chaotic, they become fodder for a right wing, law and order agenda. But when you are orderly, disciplined, and non-violent in your protests, every one of us who stands for democracy must stand for your right to express yourselves freely, including when you say things we disagree with, including if we find what you are saying offensive, even abhorrent.

Think too about whether you want to undermine your university as an institution. The universities you are occupying are crucial pillars of democracy, charged as they are with promoting freedom of thought and the exchange of ideas. Protest away, feel free to oppose university policy, but don't try to harm or take down the university itself, unless you want to ally with right wing forces who oppose universities as liberal bastions and are trying to take them down.

As you know well, it is challenging to create an environment where freedom of expression is balanced with human dignity, because in order for everyone to share equally in the freedom of expression, hate speech and language that debases or intimidates others has to be curbed. For example, you know that racist or transphobic speech actually reduces total

freedom of expression because it crowds out the space. It silences the voices of its targets. DEI work has been instrumental in teaching our country this important lesson. The next thing for DEI to take on is antisemitic speech. Antisemitism is confusing and complicated, and none of us understands it well enough. It is often invisible to non-Jews and it is internalized in all Jews, so much so that many times it is undetected, unnamed, doubted, written off, misunderstood. There was a time when this was true for every form of bias that we now better understand – racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism – invisible to those who aren't targeted, internalized by those who are. One of the confusing things about antisemitism is that a person can have white-skin privilege, and class privilege, and still be targeted by antisemitism. Before you say, "Well then antisemitism doesn't matter much because its targets have so much power," think about whether you'd say that transphobia doesn't matter because some transgender people are white and wealthy. It does matter. And beware: antisemitism serves the function of distracting, dividing, and undermining movements for justice and freedom. This will happen to every movement you care about until you understand it.

When Jews at Columbia who were minding their own business walking down the street faced shouts like "Die Jew!", "Kill Yourself!". "Die Nazi Bitches!", "We are all Hamas!", this was a gift to the right wing, who pretend that they are the only champions of Jews and Israel, and who use antisemitism on the left to defeat liberals. That antisemitism was extreme and obvious, and much of it was shouted by people who are not affiliated with the university. But in many more subtle ways, your movement is suffused with antisemitism, just like our world is suffused with antisemitism, even if it is not obvious to you, even if you cannot see it. And I am telling you, unless you actively and clearly work against it, it will destroy what you are building.

If you are a Jewish college student who is offended by these protests, I hear you. I see you. Enduring hateful, antisemitic, violent shouts and chants day after day would make anyone very fearful and angry. You want

to and you should stand up for Israel, for our family and friends who are traumatized from October 7th, who have endured extreme sexual violence that the world bizarrely denies, who are grieving, who have held their breaths for more than six months while the hostages languish and are abused in tunnels. Some of you are in truly hostile environments and you do not deserve that. It must stop.

But the worst thing you could do for the Jewish people is allow the pro-Palestinian movement to radicalize you to the right, to pull you away from your values. I know that the anti-Israel and antisemitic hate that is being hurled at Jews is making us feel that the whole world is against us and there's no one we can trust to stand with us. But the right wing are not our friends, and surely you must see that the Palestinian people, the people of Gaza need relief, need freedom. The violence that took place by right wing Jewish counter-protesters with Kahanist flags at UCLA was disgraceful. Racism, ethno-nationalism, Jewish supremacism will only undermine the cause of Israel and the Jewish people.

And it will hurt the Jewish people if you try to shut down non-hateful voices you don't agree with. Our hope and our future remain in liberal democracy, and nothing short of democracy is at stake right now. The right to protest, the right to free speech, the universities, movements for equality and justice are what have made us safe as Jews in America. Today, antisemitism must be called out and taken on in all of these arenas. We need friends who will do that for us and with us. I know it's terrifying to look around and wonder if they are out there. We must find them, embolden them, call them to their higher purpose. There is no other path for our people in this country. The alternative, the authoritarian right, is not safe or life-affirming for us or for anyone.

And now I want to speak to the adults with college age kids. I've spoken with several parents who are really worried that their kids are participating in something harmful to the Jewish people. Some of you expressed to me

that you feel torn between your relatives who are far to the right and your kids who are far to the left.

What I see among our youth is that they grew up with a Judaism that taught them to love the stranger, to stand with the oppressed, to fight for freedom, and to find the courage to use their voices for justice. We should be proud of that.

They're in an environment where the post-colonial analysis is everywhere, and it goes like this: if only the Jews would leave, if only Israel would end, if only Zionism would end, the Palestinian people could be free. Their land was stolen, and it was during the time of British colonialism, when Jews from Europe were allowed to settle in Palestine. This is the obvious source of the problem, and if we could just remove the problem (ie the Jews), then the people (ie the Palestinians) would be free. Even as there is antisemitism in the language I just used, there is truth to this post-colonial analysis.

But it's just not the whole truth. Because we know that the Jews who came to settle in Palestine in the late 19th century and the 20th century, were fleeing systemic antisemitic violence. And they didn't choose Palestine as their refuge randomly, they were going home. Our people were indigenous in Palestine when the Roman Empire came and named it Palestine and then expelled us, and literally every single day since then we have been praying to go home. What finally made us go home was a centuries-long frenzy of antisemitic murder that culminated in actual genocide. And we know that Zionism is the idea that the Jewish people, like the Palestinian people and every other people on the earth, deserve to be safe and free.

Colonists like the British and Dutch in South Africa or the French in Algeria, had a different home to return to. Decolonization was possible because they had another land. Not so with the Jewish people of Israel, whose ancient home is Israel, and whose exiled grandparents came from Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Poland, Russia, places where they narrowly escaped slaughter. For the Jews of Israel there is no other land but Israel.



Perhaps you can say some of that to your kids. Perhaps they will listen and perhaps they will not. But you can say this: It is terrible, it is shameful that the founding of the State of Israel included the dispossession, in many cases violent dispossession, of the Palestinian people from their land. It is a sin we the Jewish people must repent for, like white Americans must repent for the dispossession and murder of Native Americans at a much greater scale. But the fact remains that 7 million Jews and 7 million Palestinians live on the land today. Like in the United States, no one in Israel/Palestine is going anywhere. So there is limited utility in debating the merits of Zionism as a theory, or wishing you could go back 80 years and change what happened. 7 million Jews live there now and have nowhere else to go. 7 million Palestinians live there now and have nowhere else to go. Our challenge right now is to uphold and defend the humanity of both peoples.

What I see is a lot of our kids, in incredibly challenging environments, bravely grappling with that complexity and trying to hold on to nuance. One student said to me (this is a paraphrase): "I sympathize with the protesters. I want this war to end. The Palestinian people deserve a state. I want to join the protest. But I can't, because some of them are saying they're pro-Hamas, they're calling for violence against Israelis and Jews. My friends who are in the protest don't agree with those messages. They just want a ceasefire. But meanwhile they're being completely harassed by pro-Israel protesters who are being totally inappropriate, aggressive and in their face. And the only thing that's actually made me feel unsafe this whole time is the police who were extremely violent. It's such a mess, and I feel like there's nowhere I can go. There's no home for me."

I said to that college student, and I say to any young person listening, CBE is a home for you. You, who are grappling hard with all of the complexity. You, who are outraged by this war. You, who are defensive of Israel and the Jewish people. You, who long for Palestinian freedom. You, who are seeking nuance. You who are protesting and you who are not protesting. You who are having difficult conversations with compassion. You who want

to be in a place that can tolerate differences of perspective and disagreement and still be a community. You have a home. You have a place. You are not alone.

And what I want to say to the adults who love you, is that it's our job to hold open that home. To hold open the space and time for your kids to figure this out, while we're all trying to figure it out. It's our job not to overreact. It's our job to recognize that college students are going to try on ideologies and ideas, are going to be passionate, I was (still am, was more than) weren't you? We're in a massive moral crisis. Good for them for paying attention, for getting involved, for trying to figure out what they can do to make a difference.

And this is good instruction for the rest of us, to resist overreaction. Last week Rabbi Green talked about the way that reaction escalates conflict and division. Our job is to resist polarization. Polarization is candy for the right. Remember that we learned after the last election that the Russians tried to influence the outcome by stoking division and polarization. Our government has expressed the concern that the Chinese might be trying to influence our elections this year as well. I have no idea if that's happening. I'm not claiming it is. But think about who benefits from our divisions and whether you want to help them. And if you do not want to help them, what do you want to do differently, given that liberal democracy is on the line.

I'll close with the words of a Columbia student who wrote to me: "I was wanting to reach out to you in hopes that you might have some thoughts as to things I can do and ways to get involved to fulfill my role of making the world a slightly better place in these incredibly dark and scary times.

...one thing I have been doing is attempting to have conversations with peers and friends on both extreme sides of this issue. I (uncomfortably) have friends who have started wearing keffiyah and sleeping at the encampment, and also have friends who are staunchly pro-Israel. Because of this, I have found that my stance (I think it's simply a humanitarian stance) has allowed my friends to let their guard down and share their

opinions with me, which has also allowed me to share mine with them (and possibly give them some insight as to what people on the other side might be feeling/thinking). I have engaged in some conversations that have lasted upwards of 3 hours, and I believe that this slowly starts to bridge the divide between the two sides that I currently find to be incredibly dehumanizing and scary.”

I wrote to this student that she had answered her own question. That she was doing the very thing that is making the world a better place in these incredibly dark and scary times. She is bringing blessing into the world.

Tomorrow night I’m flying to Israel. I’ll be there for a week with T’ruah: the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights and with J Street. We will be visiting the kibbutzim in the Gaza envelope and the Nova festival site. We will be meeting with hostage families. We will be meeting with Knesset members and pollsters and democracy and coexistence activists in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. We will be going to Ramallah to meet with Palestinian leaders, political analysts and pollsters. We will be grappling with the immense pain and complexity, trying to discern a path toward freedom and safety for both peoples.

Students, adults, protesters, counter-protesters, non-protesters, please remember that when it comes to Israel/Palestine, our true purpose is not to get lost in lofty debates over abstract ideals but to bring actual blessing to real human beings who are trapped together in a small piece of land and need safety and need freedom and need peace.

Shabbat Shalom.