

Yasher Koach, Theo and Lucien. You chanted beautifully and led us so meaningfully this morning, passing through an ancient ritual inherited from your ancestors and claiming your roles as leaders and teachers of this congregation.

In teaching us, Theo, you focused on the first part of this parsha, devoted as it is to the laws of Yom Kippur. Specifically you taught us of the importance of atonement, holding ourselves accountable and course correcting when we make mistakes. And then you drew us to think about leadership, and the unique need for leaders to atone for their missteps, as well as the need for those whom they lead to hold *them* accountable when they're doing something wrong. This is especially true of your generation's need to take adults to task as they steward the health of the planet into the future, and it is an essential exercise in any democracy.

And Lucien, you combined that first part of the parsha focused on atonement, and its reference to the scapegoat, la'Azazel, with the latter portion forbidding sexual impropriety. You reminded us of the value of *not* scapegoating groups of people, as humans have done seemingly forever. And in particular you tied these pieces together beautifully by noting the ways in which LGBTQ people have been scapegoated over time.

Each of these lessons is so important. And this week I'm holding both of these teachings as I think about the experience of being a Jew in America today. As I consider the war in Gaza, and the ongoing protests on campuses around the country, and broadly the political ferment in which we live.

Last week I spoke about the campus protests and the need for deescalation. And both Rabbis Kolin and Timoner have now given sermons responding to the protests and both the need to support free speech and liberation for Palestinians, while also combating antisemitism where we find it. But as this parsha and your teachings lead us to think about atonement and leadership, I think a couple things stand out as we continue to grapple with this moment.

First, the importance of not falling into the easy pattern of scapegoating. In the past two weeks, we've seen the headlines of certain protesters corrupting their movement with antisemitic animus. In real time, we've seen how some people have sought to present Jews as the problem right now. Often conflating Jews and the State of Israel, but also acting as though if only Jews would go away, then Palestinians would be free, saying nothing of Hamas, which is certainly a very real obstacle to that goal. And we've also watched as many in the pro-Israel camp have placed blame on the protest movement itself, acting as though the students are proxies of Iran, as the CEO of the Anti-Defamation League claimed this past week. This sort of rhetoric is what led to the violent counter-protest at UCLA this week, in which the protesters were seen as *the* enemy, an object *upon* which to place blame or *toward* which to direct their anger. In other words, scapegoating, which, as we've seen, only yields further escalation.

And as a second lesson from your teachings that feels relevant, where we see leaders of the movements for Israel or Palestine that are making mistakes, those of us watching must take them to task and insist that they

course correct. I choose to believe that the majority of the students who are protesting are motivated by exactly this wish. To move their leaders away from policies that they find objectionable by engaging in civil disobedience. And insofar as *we* want to root out antisemitism from the protest movement, here, too, we can hold the leaders of that movement accountable to do so. To be *their* watchful eye, like in the Sforno text you taught, Theo.

Friends...this coming week will mark seven months since October 7th. And in these seven months, all the more so these past two weeks, it has been near impossible to know precisely what to say. Not just for me as a rabbi, but presumably for any of us. Anyone mortified by the attacks on Israel that day, and *also* horrified by the scale of loss in Gaza since then. Anyone who wants both Israelis and Palestinians to live in freedom and dignity. Anyone who's supportive of the protests on campuses, or simply the right to protest, and *also* disturbed by accounts of antisemitic threats and slogans.

Most of us feel caught between values. Between freedom for *our* people and freedom for another. Between security for Israelis and security for Palestinians. Between acceptance and control. Between the universal and the particular, between friends, family members, synagogue members, colleagues. Between our personal opinions and our professional roles. Between different parts of ourselves on any given day.

Feeling stuck in between two poles or two people or two ideas is excruciating. And it is enticing to seek a way out of it. Picking a side, but thereby reifying the dangerous notion that there *are* two opposite sides. It

certainly feels like that, at times. But that kind of black and white thinking suggests that there will forever be winners and losers, which I pray is *not* the case.

Instead, as we think about Yom Kippur in the Torah portion this week, I see some wisdom in resisting that binary, and remaining in-between.

Our sages taught that there are three basic categories of people: tzaddikim, righteous people; rashaim, wicked people; and beinonim, people in between. From the preposition *bein*, meaning, “between.”

Tzaddikim, perfectly righteous people, have no need for atoning on Yom Kippur because they never do anything wrong. According to Maimonides, rashaim, wicked ones, *also* have no need for Yom Kippur, because, in his view, God would smite them before Yom Kippur arrives. But in Rambam’s words, “v’ha’beinoni tolin oto ad yom ha-kippurim.” Yom Kippur exists as the day on which the verdict is sealed for all those in-between. Which is to say that Yom Kippur is predicated on the idea that almost everyone alive, certainly every Jew, is in between, in some way...hence the communal holiday. And it’s a good reminder that very few people are actually righteous all the time, nor are they really, purely evil.

According to the Tanya, the foundational text of Lubavitch Hasidism, our goal as Jews is not to try to become tzaddikim, purely righteous, since that is impossible for most people. But rather, to pursue life as beinonim. To be guided by the impulse to do good, since we know we will make mistakes. To do as best we can to counteract whatever we do wrong, even if that may

present a psychic conflict for us. And to hold our competing values in equipoise.

Today we find ourselves, bein, between, not righteous and wicked, but groups of people who insist that they are on one side or another. We may find ourselves bein, between, different parts of ourselves and different things we want to say or believe. But painful as it is, to remain betwixt, it may be a Jewish value to do so. Holding competing ideas, and sitting in the pain of them side by side, so that some kind of synthesis might be achieved. Or so that we can live in a world that is more than one thing.

Now, don't mistake me here. I'm not both-sidesing this. Being "between" does not necessarily mean being in the exact middle of a continuum between two opposite poles. Very frequently, being "between " means being closer to one side than the other, maybe so close to a side that it appears almost indistinguishable to an outside observer. But being between allows for the possibility of change. Just as neither a Tzaddik nor Rasha can be changed on Yom Kippur, those who are convinced that they are uniquely correct or pure in their views...cannot be moved. But typically, they can't move others, either.

By contrast, the ones in-between can do both. And in a time when we all know something's gotta give, that the world must *be* moved and *a/so* move forward...how can we NOT accept the mantle of remaining beinonim?

Being in between might look like allowing ourselves to listen to competing points of view. In doing so, we can develop empathy and sharpen

ourselves, not for the sake of winning the argument, but for the sake of fostering some kind of understanding. Or maybe being in between means questioning our news sources, not accepting whole cloth the easy narrative that scratches some primal itch. But really probing the validity of what we hear, again in the service of higher truth and understanding.

Understanding this war, this moment, how to feel, what to think, and what to do. Understanding all of this...is what we want right now. And it's worth noting that the Hebrew verb "to understand," *l'havin*, and the noun, *binah*, meaning "understanding" or "discernment," comes from the same exact root as the preposition *bein*, or the noun, *beinoni*.

The only way to really understand anything, but perhaps especially to understand the chaos of our time, is to remain in between. At least a little bit. When there are so many voices calling us toward a "side," which they define, it is worth resisting those calls. And though it is painful to be pulled constantly from side to side, I have to believe that allowing ourselves the humility and grace to sit in the mess of it all, somewhere in between, is the only way to *understand* how to move through it.

Shabbat Shalom.