

Nasso 5784

Responding to Sage Friedman and Dash Liebman  
AOC Conversation

Dash and Sage, you each gave us important things to think about. Dash you looked at the dedication of the Nazirites and Ruth, our central character for the holiday of Shavuot. You related their dedication to G-d and the Israelite people, achieved through strict devotion and commitment, to the everyday challenges in your life and our world today — whether that's improving your grades at school or giving your all on the soccer field. You made the case that their examples are about putting in the effort, being disciplined, and doing hard things to achieve one's goals. You taught us that dedication to something greater than yourself brings meaning, and ultimately blessing.

Sage you talked about what happens when we do something wrong. What do we do with our regret? How do we acknowledge our wrongdoing, repair our relationships with ones we've wronged, and make restitution? Sage, you taught that the process of repair not only heals the wound of the one who was wronged, it alleviates the guilty conscience of the wrongdoer and also makes peace in the community. You taught us that the healing is even a reflection of our relationship with G-d.

As you taught us, Sage, the first step to this entire process is the recognition of wrongdoing, the awareness that one has caused harm. You cannot apologize, you cannot make restitution, you cannot repair a relationship or receive forgiveness, unless and until you know you did something wrong.

Dash and Sage, bringing your themes together to the events of this week, we might ask What happens if you get so dedicated to a goal, so single focused on a purpose that is giving you meaning, so sure that what you're doing is good, that you can't even see the harm you're causing? What happens if your dedication is so all-encompassing that you justify the harm

you cause. What happens if you plow ahead with your goal, decide it's righteous, and don't see or know or care who you hurt along the way. That you don't even know that your actions are so extreme they're actually undermining your goal?

Obviously I'm no longer talking about getting good grades or trying hard on the soccer field. I'm talking about the activists of Within Our Lifetime, a group who say they're for Palestinian liberation and seem unable to perceive their wrongdoing. Within Our Lifetime has been protesting New York museums, calling on them to divest from Israel. A couple of weeks ago, a massive crowd organized by this group protested at the Brooklyn Museum, a museum that is famously progressive and focused on social justice. They defaced the museum itself inside and out, scaled the building to the roof to unfurl a banner, briefly occupied the lobby with an encampment, and defaced Jewish artist Deborah Kass's OY/YO sculpture. The police came and made arrests. The Brooklyn Museum is a public museum on public land, so the police do not need permission from the museum to enter.

This week, in what they called a Day of Rage, Within Our Lifetime protested outside of the Nova exhibit. This is an exhibit that remembers the 364 young people who were murdered on October 7th while dancing at an outdoor music festival in Israel, and the 40 people who were taken hostage. I have been to the actual Nova site and seen the faces of the innocent young people who were brutally murdered that day. These supposedly pro-Palestinian activists protested outside this exhibit, claiming that it is "Zionist propaganda." On the way to their protest they took over a subway car demanding that anyone on the subway who is a Zionist raise their hand and get off the train.

Also this week, they targeted the home of Anne Pasternak, the Director of the Brooklyn Museum, who is a member of our congregation. They splashed red paint all over the front of her apartment building, to look like blood. They hung a big banner that called her by name a "white supremacist Zionist". They spray painted on the sidewalk that she has

blood on her hands. And perhaps most frightening, they painted red upside down triangles on her building. The red triangle is a Hamas symbol representing the next target for violence. Anne Pasternak has nothing to do with Israel or Gaza, except that she's a Jew.

I want to be very clear. This is straight up antisemitism. Protesting the commemoration of innocent victims of murder. Demanding that people on public transportation identify themselves as Zionists, which is a code word for Jew, and threatening that they'd have to get off of the train. Targeting a Jew at her home. Calling her a Zionist when they know nothing of her views on Israel. Calling her a white supremacist, equating Zionism with white supremacism. Targeting her home with a symbol for violence. It is antisemitism, it is hate, it is very clear incitement to violence, and it is truly dangerous.

This group is openly in favor of violence and the elimination of the one Jewish country in the world. They refuse to denounce Hamas, calling them "our people's resistance forces." They write the word "Israel" with a lowercase "i", and call Israel "the Zionist entity", which has long been a phrase used to deny Israel's legitimacy as a country. They say on their website, "We will not condemn October 7th." Either they or another group held a protest in Union Square this week in which they unfurled a banner that said "Long Live October 7th."

To make very clear where they stand, on the night that they attacked Anne Pasternak's home leaflets were left in her neighborhood saying that the Palestinian Authority does not represent the Palestinian people, calling instead for an end to all political normalization of "The Zionist Entity." "Long Live the Intifada" said the leaflets.

This is not legitimate protest for Palestinian freedom, and it actually harms the Palestinian people. This blatant antisemitic incitement to hate and violence against Jews, this agenda to eliminate the one Jewish country in the world and the 7 million Jews who live there, pulls people away from the vital cause of ending this war immediately, rebuilding Gaza, ending the

occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and establishing a Palestinian state.

Within Our Lifetime is not a tiny fringe organization. It is at the center of the pro-Palestine movement in this country. It is working in big coalitions with activists involved in the college encampments, in the shutting down of bridges and public spaces in major US cities, and in collaboration with organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace.

A lot of progressive people are caught up in this. They see eight months of horrific suffering in Gaza. The starvation of millions, millions displaced from their homes, their homes and neighborhoods utterly destroyed, disease spreading, bombs falling, atrocities everywhere. They see Israel as powerful and causing great harm. They rightly want to speak out about it. They rightly want it to end. They rightly want the Palestinian people to have their own state, their own government, the freedom from Israeli occupation they deserve. So they think they're doing something good by attending these protests. They think they're dedicating themselves to a righteous cause. And perhaps in their dedication they cannot see that they have slid from an effort to protect life and defend freedom into hate, into dehumanization, into truly dangerous antisemitism. Or perhaps they think it's justified because the cause is so important and they are so dedicated to it.

Our parasha opens in the midst of a description of the different roles of the three groups of Levites: the B'nei Kehat, the B'nei Gershon, and the B'nei Merari. Each clan is responsible for carrying a different set of parts of the Tabernacle when it is being moved from place to place on their journey through the wilderness. The 13th century commentator Chizkuni notes that their tasks are described differently because the objects that the B'nei Kehat carry are so holy that they cannot be touched and therefore they need to be fully covered at all times. This is more difficult than carrying burdens that do not need to be covered, burdens that everyone can see.

Rabbi Yael Marans applies this to our time and place, reflecting that everyone has hidden burdens that others cannot see, and that being aware that we do not know what another person is carrying, in her words, “lies at the heart of community building.” Knowing that there is more than meets the eye every time you interact with someone can sensitize you and open you to listening, to being curious, and to caring.

In this society it’s hard to see the burden that Jews are carrying, particularly Jews who are white or wealthy. It’s hard to see the trauma and the fear. Like the B’nei Kehat, our burden is hidden.

Unlike in the extreme events of this week, antisemitism is often hard to perceive, and harder to take seriously. It’s hard to understand or believe how dangerous it is. It’s a kind of blind spot because its danger is largely hidden.

Since October 7th, some Jews have been saying that we need to give up on progressive movements, partners, and coalitions. The antisemitism among progressives has been so painful and so widespread, some Jews say that there’s no future for the Jewish people in causes like LGBT rights or climate change or racial justice, or even the Democratic party.

I have been making the case, along with many others, that it is precisely progressive movements for change that have made Jews safe in this country, that liberal democracy with its safeguards for minorities has made the United States a good home for the Jewish people, perhaps the best in our history, and that the only path forward for us is to repair those relationships, those coalitions, and to find allies who are willing to take on antisemitism with us. Others have argued that you cannot make someone care about antisemitism if they don’t. You can’t make someone see your pain or your burden if they don’t. You can’t make someone care about you if they don’t, and that it doesn’t seem like progressive non-Jews are going to care about antisemitism and Jews any time soon.

This week, independent of these terrible acts I've just described, we had the biggest breakthrough in the fight against antisemitism since October 7th. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, AOC, participated in a brilliant 30 minute dialogue with our member Amy Spitalnick, who runs the Jewish Council for Public Affairs and earlier successfully sued the Nazis who marched in Charlottesville, and Stacy Burdett, who used to work for the ADL, both of whom are experts in antisemitism. YOU MUST WATCH THIS CONVERSATION. Just Google it.

It was honest. It was sharp in its clarity about antisemitism, and AOC acknowledged that antisemitism is a problem in progressive spaces. She acknowledged that there is real danger when criticism of the Israeli government crosses a line into harms against the Jewish community. She said that it's an assault on our values as Americans and specifically an assault on progressive values, and that it undermines and endangers movements for progressive causes. She urged progressives to take it seriously. Later, when Within Our Lifetime attacked the Nova exhibit, AOC issued a statement immediately calling it antisemitism and said, "Antisemitism has no place in our city nor any broader movement that centers human dignity and liberation." Jamaal Bowman followed her immediately with his own similar statement.

The acknowledgement of wrongdoing – of antisemitism – in the progressive movements, is the first step toward repair for our people in American liberal democracy. Mark my words: the conversation between AOC, Amy Spitalnick and Stacy Burdett this week was a watershed moment in our people's history. It is *the* model for how we move forward as Jews in America. All we need now is for other non-Jewish progressive leaders to emulate AOC. We need 20, 50, 100 progressive leaders to do this, to name antisemitism as real and dangerous to progressive movements for change, to talk about how it is being weaponized to undermine those movements, and to urge all progressives to learn about it, understand it, and take it seriously so that Jews can be included fully in movements for change and so that progressive movements can succeed. And perhaps one of the most important messages of the dialogue is that we don't have to agree about

everything to be effective allies with one another. Jews can belong in progressive coalitions despite real differences in our views on Israel. DEI and other efforts at belonging, inclusion, and equity for all can include an analysis of antisemitism and embrace the Jewish people. Jews can re-enter the conversation and imagination about the future we want to see in this country and the world.

This is a cause worthy of our dedication, both for our safety AND for our values. It is a process that will require readiness to acknowledge wrongdoing among all participants. We will have to speak out when antisemitism is being used as a false accusation, as a weapon, against progressives and in particular it is often used against people of color. Progressive non-Jews will have to speak out against antisemitism in all of its forms, including their own unconscious bias when they learn of it. The conversations won't always be easy, but these are the very conversations that make this country a good place for us to live.

This is the road to repair. This is the path to reconciliation. This is how we find our way back home to American liberal democracy. Let us dedicate ourselves.

And as my colleague and friend, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, the Senior Rabbi of Park Avenue Synagogue, did last night, let us offer praise, gratitude, and blessing where it is deserved. He said:

“Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez – for calling out the scourge of antisemitism, for your courage in engaging in civil conversations, for modeling the

kind of discourse our world so desperately needs...

In the words of this week's Torah reading

May God Bless you and Keep You.

May God's light shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May God's countenance be turned towards you and grant you, our country, and a suffering humanity – the greatest blessing of all – Shalom – Peace.”

Shabbat Shalom.