

Bamidbar 5784

June 8, 2024

Responding to Elliot Myers and Orly Neier

Elliot and Orly, you gave us such beautiful messages today! Beautiful and complementary messages. The idea that the census demonstrated how beloved we are by G-d, each like a totally unique seashell that you take out and count and make designs with. And that each of us has a name given by our parents, known by our community, and created by our own actions. And that the tachash skins represent that part of ourselves that we might not think is valuable but that actually has the power to affect other people in a holy way, and we may never even notice until the moment to use it appears.

I had three experiences this week that relate. A member of CBE came to meet with me because she was considering pulling her child out of Yachad, our religious school, and leaving the synagogue. She was considering this because she is not sure she wants to raise her children as Jews anymore. She is struggling so deeply with the way that Jews are behaving right now, that she is not sure she wants to identify with Judaism. At first I felt defensive of Judaism and Jews when I heard her speaking, but then I listened and I really understood. She said it wasn't even primarily about Israel or Israelis, because she understands that the experience of being a Jew in Israel is so shaped by being on such a small strip of land surrounded on all sides by enemies. She said it's American Jews who are making her so alienated. It's Jews who are using their power and wealth to target university presidents and silence criticism of what is happening in Gaza in the name of defending against antisemitism. It's Jews who are trying to eliminate DEI. It's Jews who seem not to care much about the millions of innocent human beings in Gaza who are starving and being bombed. She pointed to a couple of messages we've sent that didn't mention Gazans, one about our participation in the Israel march in Washington, DC, and she wondered whether she belonged in this place.

She had heard some of my sermons, and knew that I had been speaking about the horrors taking place in Gaza. I want to say clearly today to anyone who is listening, that I and we here at CBE decry with all of our might the dehumanization, the occupation, and the killing of thousands of innocent

Palestinian people in both Gaza and the West Bank. We just learned this week about the detention of thousands of Palestinians in Israeli detention centers and prisons. Thousands of people are being kept blindfolded and handcuffed without trial, and undergoing physical beatings and abuse. The *New York Times* profiled several who were completely innocent and were simply swept up as suspected militants and sent to these camps. If I think about how we have been in agony over the Israeli hostages, not knowing their condition or their fate, praying every day for their welfare and their release. I think about the Palestinian families and communities who are equally bereft, not knowing the whereabouts of their loved ones, whether they are alive or dead. The atrocities of this war are crushing, and I have used my voice every single week against them.

At one point in our conversation, this member asked me: “Are you proud to be a Jew?” and I said “Yes. Yes, I am. There are Jews doing terrible things right now, in Israel and here. But they do not define me as a Jew. They must not define you either. We decide what it means that we are Jews. I am proud to be of a people who chose to make the story of a group of slaves who walked to freedom our story. A people who built the Torah and our ritual calendar around that story, so that the most repeated mitzvah in the Torah is “Do not oppress the stranger for you know the heart of the stranger.” Yes, I am proud to be of that people. I asked this member, whose work is to provide legal aid to refugees, do you see in the landscape of your social justice work a disproportionate number of Jews compared to our representation in the population. “Yes,” she acknowledged, “There are a remarkable number of Jews working to support immigrants and refugees and across the many organizations working for human rights and social justice. Yes, of course there are.” That is who we are. That is why I am proud to be a Jew. And that is why we must never walk away from Judaism and the Jewish people, because our voices, our presence, our unique gifts and qualities, are the very gifts and qualities that the Jewish people need right now. Rather than lower our heads or our voices, we must lift our heads, raise our voices, we must get louder, we must make clear who we are as Jews and what we stand for and how we live and what we believe. Louder than ever.

A second related experience was at the celebration of my dear friend Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, who is retiring after 32 years of service to her community, CBST Congregation Bet Simchat Torah. Rabbi Kleinbaum has been one of my closest colleagues and friends in the rabbinate during my years here, and one of

the most important Jewish voices in our city and our country, and the celebration of her leadership was extraordinary. Hillary Clinton was there in person and it included a tribute from President Biden, Senator Schumer, and many Broadway stars. But the most memorable thing about the event was Rabbi Kleinbaum's farewell speech to her community. In it, she acknowledged the incredibly difficult times we are living through, including the rise of frightening antisemitism, and she said to them "When antisemitism is on the rise, what do we do?" And then the whole room chanted back to her in unison, "Be More Jewish!"

It has never occurred to me to develop a call and response with CBE, where everyone chants in unison. It was pretty cool. And its message was spot on. Exactly when you're tempted to take your mezuzah off your door or your star from around your neck, whether because you are ashamed of the way some Jews are behaving or because you are legitimately afraid of very real and pervasive antisemitism, that is the very moment to put on that star, to wear that kippah, to show up for services, to invest your Jewish community, to light those Shabbos candles, to study Torah at Shavuot this Tuesday night. Because you matter, because every single person, every single Jew, has unique gifts and qualities that we need. Because you must never, ever underestimate the power of your presence and your voice.

A third and final story. Also this week, a CBE member wrote to me with a draft of an article she had written with a group of academic physicians for a major national medical journal about antisemitism in the medical profession. Her article was excellent. In particular, she and her co-authors took on the attacks against DEI, and the problems with DEI as related to Jews and antisemitism. These authors stood against the very Jewish voices that the first person who came to my office this week was so upset about. Rather than call for the elimination of DEI, these authors championed its importance for the medical world, and also said clearly that it needs to be expanded to be able to take on antisemitism effectively. Hooray! That is exactly what needs to happen, so that rather than pitting Jews against all oppressed people, we expand the efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion to include Jews.

Did I know that we have a member here who is an academic physician in a position to write about antisemitism and the preservation of DEI in the medical profession? I did not. It made me marvel and wonder at how many other of the

1,250 households of this community are positioned in fields I know nothing about, and if we were all able and motivated and coordinated to use our presence and raise our voices, think about the impact we could have, think about the difference we could make, think about the faces and voices of the Jewish people that could be made visible and audible, the way we could shape the story of who Jews are and what Judaism is about, while standing up for the humanity of both Israeli and Palestinian people, and all of the other causes we hold most dear.

So yes, Elliot and Orly, yes, each of us has a name, as the poet Zelda said, given by G-d and our parents, our relationship to our community, and our actions in the world; a name and a voice and qualities of character that make us needed in this world. Speaking of this week's parasha, Noam Elimelech wrote that the first verse: "Y-H-W-H spoke to Moses in the desert of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first day of the second month of the second year since they had left Egypt (Num. 1:1)" was about renewal. The word for month, chodesh, it is from the root chadash, which means new. I'd add that the word for year, Shanah, is the same root as the word shinui, which means change.

Yesterday was the beginning of a new month, Sivan, and the holiday of Shavuot, when we relive the experience of standing at Sinai, the transformative experience of revelation, by studying Torah from dusk until dawn, is this Tuesday night. Here at CBE we will have more than 40 teachers and probably more than 400 people engaged in a festival of learning throughout the night. Whether you come or not, there's no better time to change to become more aligned with Torah's highest truths and values. Noam Elimelech teaches that the Torah's words "the second month of the second year since they left Egypt" comes to teach that there is a second Exodus within our own lives, whenever we decide to change. May we decide today that we will never again underestimate the power of our unique qualities, and instead use our presence and our voice to stand for the Jewish people and for the Judaism, and for the world, we believe in.

Shabbat Shalom.

