

Nitzavim 5785

September 20, 2025

Bnei Mitzvah of Jonah Breitzer and Micah Kramer

Jonah and Micah, I love your divrei Torah, and I noticed that you responded to each other's verses as well as your own. Jonah, you asked about the verse "Concealed acts concern our God יהוה; but with overt acts, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching." Micah, you asked about the verse "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live."

Jonah, you went on to explore the nature of the overt acts and the idea of applying the provisions of the teaching over time, meaning the terms of the covenant and how we are to understand it and live it today. Micah, you went on to question whether a Gd who sets out consequences of blessing and curse, life and death is harsh and unforgiving.

Micah, you found that though there are descriptions of Gd in the Torah that are tough, these descriptions are not the essence of who Gd is. It reminded me of a teaching I studied recently from Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, who imagines that when in the Amidah we call Gd "HaGadol, v'haGibor, v'haNorah," Gd dresses up to be what we need. We need Gd to be great/gadol? Gd dresses up in greatness. We need Gd to be mighty/gibor? Gd dresses up in might. We need Gd to be awesome/norah? Gd dresses up in awesomeness. But none of these are Gd's essence. Levi Ytzhak goes on to teach that in the Shema what we are saying is Shema—pay attention, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai will dress up as Eloheinu, our Gd, what we need Gd to be, but Adonai Echad. Adonai is actually a Oneness that surpasses all such descriptions. As Maimonides taught, Gd is beyond human comprehension and all descriptions of Gd are false limitations. Gd is the ultimate unknown – as it says in the verse that Jonah focused on, "concealed acts concern our Gd."

The themes of these coming holy days are true— forgiveness is real—our ability to turn from wrong behavior, to reflect on ourselves and change, is what Gd calls us to do. We describe Gd on Rosh Hashanah as moving from the throne of judgement to the throne of compassion, exactly that combination of strictness and forgiveness that you long for, Micah. The underlying idea here is that Gd

believes in us. We think the big thing is that we're supposed to believe in Gd. The big thing is that Gd believes in us. In the mornings we say "rabah emunatecha." Gd has a great faith in us that we have it within us to become the people we're meant to be – to change what we know isn't our best. This season has arrived to call us to do it.

And that brings us so nicely to you, Jonah. Because you are calling for us to take on the covenant. To understand its metaphors as metaphors, and to interpret, adapt, and apply it now. So that Judaism is not only a thing we do when we come to the synagogue but is our whole lives. You may not know this, but this is what I personally want to focus on as my main focus. Our ability to adapt covenant to our times is our ability to make Judaism the guide and structure we need. And boy, right now, we need guidance. We need structure for how to live in these perilous and uncertain times. It really is as Micah's verse said, a choice between blessing and curse, between life and death, as I'll show in a minute.

Your combination of messages are exactly what we need on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, and exactly what we need after this week. Not only was this a week when Jimmy Kimmel was pulled from the airwaves for angering the president and the administration said it would target NGOs it does not like, it was also a week when \$10.4 million was given from the National Endowment for the Humanities to the Tikvah Fund.

The Tikvah Fund is a right-wing Jewish organization that funds the Kohelet Policy Forum, the force behind Israel's judicial reform, which was the attempt to reduce the power of the judiciary as a check and balance on the Prime Minister. Kohelet's founder and chair, Moshe Koppel, sits on Tikvah's board. The Tikvah fund also supported Netanyahu's autobiography during the 2022 election to help him win. So National Endowment for the Humanities funding was taken from dozens of museums and diverse cultural institutions in the United States that never received grants more than in the tens and hundreds of thousands of dollars, and was bundled into a single \$10.4 million gift to a right-wing Jewish organization that is supporting authoritarianism in Israel.

I ask you, is that good for the Jews? The funding is supposed to be for antisemitism protection. Do we think this gift helps to make the Jewish people

more safe? Or less? And how about Israelis? Do we think it helps make Israelis more safe? Or less?

Also this week, despite the fact that IDF chief of staff Eyal Zamir urged Netanyahu to make a hostage deal and not to enter Gaza City, despite the fact that 550 former leaders of the IDF, Shin Bet and Mossad, wrote a letter to Donald Trump asking him to get Netanyahu to stop the war, and saying that Hamas is no longer a strategic threat; despite the fact that the remaining living hostages are believed to be held in Gaza City and the IDF said that if it attacked the city it could not ensure that they would not be killed; despite the fact that 2 million people are in human-caused famine; despite all of this, bombs and artillery rained down on Gaza City this week, and desperate, starving people fled for their lives.

The Torah gives us ample guidance for what to do in a situation like this, starting with the commandment to redeem captives before pursuing other goals. The Israeli government, though it claims to speak in the name of Judaism, is violating Torah, and keeping its people in a forever war while dismantling their democracy. That is why Israelis are in the streets every single week; it's why Israeli students called a national strike, it's why reservists are refusing to fight. It is why we must all call for equal enforcement of the Leahy Laws, which ban US sales of offensive weapons to countries engaged in gross violations of human rights. Those of us who love Israel and Israelis must protect funding for Iron Dome, while calling for a ban on US-made offensive weapons for use in Gaza. All it requires is equal enforcement of existing law.

The Jewish supremacist ideology of Meir Kahane has infected a minority of our people who now have power. They, Messianists, and authoritarians together, are wreaking massive and catastrophic human injury to the Palestinian people while destroying Israel itself and making it a pariah state.

Amir and Noam Tibon, a father and son who survived October 7th and saved many lives and were here last night, speaking at our service and at dinner and with me for about a half hour in my study, said two things that we all need to hear: First, American Jews are saying the wrong thing to bring home the hostages. It is not just "Bring Them Home", it is "Make a Deal and End the War." And until American Jews pressure Donald Trump to force Netanyahu to end the

war, it will not end. Second, Israelis cannot begin to heal from their trauma until the war is over and the hostages are home. In some sense, the coalition of corruption and right wing settlers that is the government of Israel is holding the entire country hostage. They are all on hold, stuck on October 7th, until this war ends and the hostages come home. They cannot even begin to heal until then.

The stakes are so high. This is why we must boldly adapt and apply the covenant to our moment. The future of our people depends on it.

You and I don't have to solve all of this ourselves. We simply need to raise our voices and live the best lives we can in the moment we're in. And that's what the two of you taught us today, Jonah and Micah, that we ought to claim Torah for our time, and that we ought to turn toward Gd, who has high standards and believes that we can change.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova.