

Ki Teitzei 5785
September 6, 2025
Naming of Zoe Amman
Bnei Mitzvah of Sam Burger and Micah Pardo-Blum

Sam and Micah, you both chose to talk about fairness. Micah, I love that you were able to see our people's concern with fairness within the laws about gender and clothing. The truth is that an abiding concern with fairness – in the judiciary, in family relationships, in the marketplace – permeates both Torah and Rabbinic writings. I had never before seen it in this verse. But you showed us what was underneath the surface, and that is an ideal for a d'var Torah, to help us see some kernel of underlying truth in a text that we might otherwise write off as a vestige of the past or an affront to our values. Yasher Koach.

And Sam, you took another strategy. You came with a critical eye to the verses of the Torah about outcasts, whether those are people of neighboring nations or Israelites because of their birth. Then you found that you weren't the first person to be troubled by them. Instead, rabbis 2,000 years ago and 1,000 years ago also found them to be problematic, so much so that they used their authority to fix them, whether by interpreting the laws in ways that clearly subvert their meaning or by making up biological fictions to ensure that the old laws would not be applied in their time.

Some people think about Judaism as a very old tradition, and it is. But Judaism is also very new. Because in every generation it is made new. We have permission in our generation to adapt it to our time, because the ancient Rabbis saw it as their mission to adapt Torah in their time to make it work. As you show us, Sam, they did it 2,000 years ago and 1,000 years ago, so we have permission, even an obligation, to do the same. Because when we fail to do so, Torah becomes either an irrelevant relic, or worse a regressive and dangerous weapon.

Your concern, Sam, was that the Torah was putting the Israelites above their neighbors. That's a highly relevant concern today. We are used to being an

oppressed minority, abused by and exiled from most countries where we've lived for the last 2,000 years, all around the world. The State of Israel was founded to be our haven from that abuse, from discrimination, imprisonments, pogroms or massacres, expulsions, and an attempt to annihilate us from the earth. But since the founding of the State of Israel and even before, a small minority of our people have believed that Jews were superior to their neighbors. The ugliest manifestation of this was a movement led by Meir Kahane, an Orthodox rabbi who actually grew up here in Brooklyn, moved to Israel in 1971, and preached not only that Jews were superior, but that Jews should be violent against Palestinians and should transfer them or expel them away from the land. His book and his slogan was *They Must Go*. He started a political party and even won a seat in the Knesset. But he was widely boycotted by the people of Israel, he was arrested many times, and in 1985 the Knesset passed an amendment to the Basic Law of Israel, which is like Israel's constitution, barring political parties that incite racism. In 1990 Kahane was assassinated here in New York, but his ideas didn't die. They have been growing underground, and above ground, for decades, particularly among right wing religious settlers – like how white nationalism has been growing in this country.

This week's parasha actually includes a commandment against hate: "Do not hate an Edomite, because he is your brother. Do not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land." This is quite a startling statement from Moses, who also many times relates G-d's command that every year on Passover we need to tell the story to our children about what the Egyptians did to us, about how they enslaved us and oppressed us with hard labor, about how Pharaoh commanded his people to throw every male Israelite child in the river to drown. We are commanded every year to eat the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs to remember how the Egyptian people "embittered our lives."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that with this verse Moses is saying, "To be free, you have to let go of hate.... Resentment, rage, humiliation, a sense of injustice, the desire to restore honor by inflicting injury on your former persecutors – these are conditions of a profound lack of freedom...." Sacks goes on, "If they continued to hate their erstwhile enemies, Moses would have

taken the Israelites out of Egypt, but he would not have taken Egypt out of the Israelites. Mentally, they would still be there, slaves to the past. They would still be in chains, not of metal but of the mind – and chains of the mind are the most constricting of all.... You cannot create a free society on the basis of hate.”

But followers of Kahane are now in the Israeli government and his ideas are regularly heard in Israeli media and in the Israeli political conversation. There are a lot of reasons for this, including widespread despair and pessimism that there could ever or will ever be peace, and now deep fear and trauma from October 7th. But also there is a minority of the Israeli population, the religious settler movement, which interprets verses of Torah like the ones you were concerned about, Sam, to mean that G-d wants the Jewish people to dispossess their neighbors and take all of the land. And they believe that doing so will bring the Messiah. The normalization of Kahane’s hate and Jewish supremacy along with the religious settlers’ Messianism, are animating the Gaza war and enabling Benjamin Netanyahu to prosecute it without regard for Palestinian life and to continue it indefinitely. They have exploited Israelis’ trauma from October 7th to advance a fanatical extremist and eliminationist agenda.

Palestinians are being shot dead in the West Bank, their land stolen routinely, and the Jewish religious perpetrators are not punished. Israeli Finance Minister Betzalel Smotrich has just officially called for the annexation of 82% of the West Bank, explicitly to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state. Meanwhile in Gaza, two million Palestinians are starving. As of last month, human-caused famine has officially been declared. Hundreds of people have already died of starvation. One thousand people have been shot and killed at aid stations as they desperately tried to get food. And now, the army is attacking Gaza City, despite the fact that the current Chief of Staff of the IDF, Eyal Zamir, begged Netanyahu to take the hostage deal that’s on the table instead of assaulting Gaza City.

Let’s be clear, at any point since their brutal massacre on October 7, Hamas could return the hostages and surrender its weapons and this would all be over. Hamas is holding its own people hostage along with Israelis, with a long

term strategy of destroying Israel's global reputation and undermining American support. Israel is playing right into that strategy with its refusal to make hostage deals and its dehumanization of Palestinians.

Israelis have been filling the streets in protests for more than a year. On August 17th, more than one million people protested nationwide – that's out of a population of just ten million. This week, Israeli high school students staged a nationwide strike calling for a hostage deal and ceasefire. This month, 365 reservist soldiers announced their refusal to report for duty. Another 350 air force reservists signed a petition declaring the war "pointless". In August, the New York Times quoted Israeli officers and soldiers who described a 40-50% attrition rate of soldiers in their units.

In April of this year, more than 550 former Israeli military leaders, including former heads of the Shin Bet and Mossad, wrote to Donald Trump asking him to pressure Netanyahu to end the war. "It is our professional judgement that Hamas no longer poses a strategic threat to Israel," the officials said. "Your credibility with the vast majority of Israelis augments your ability to steer Prime Minister Netanyahu and his government in the right direction: End the war, return the hostages, stop the suffering," they wrote. Ami Ayalon, former head of the Shin Bet, said "Personally, I am ashamed of what we are doing in Gaza." He also said that the war is leading to "the loss of [Israel's] identity and security."

This week, Donald Trump did make statements calling on Israel to end the war and calling on Hamas to release all of the remaining living hostages. Let's hope these words work. But writing in Haaretz, Amir Tibon, a columnist (who actually will be speaking here at CBE on Friday night in two weeks) wrote "If Trump thinks his words will serve as a wake-up call for Netanyahu, he will be sorely disappointed. Netanyahu and Israel's Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, his interlocutor at the White House, are at peace with Israel's loss of international support, heightened isolation, the threats of sanctions against it, and arrest warrants for its leaders (including Netanyahu himself). The two don't seem to care, and the reason, ironically, is the very man sounding the alarm: Donald Trump. In fact, since Netanyahu's visit to Washington in February, two weeks after Trump's inauguration, the Israeli premier has been

acting as if there are no consequences whatsoever for his decisions. This is true about the war in Gaza, but also internally in Israel, as he attacks its democratic institutions and increases social tensions inside the country for his own political benefit.” According to former US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller, Netanyahu told Anthony Blinken that he intends to fight this war “for decades.”

There must be consequences. Torah demands that we care about all human beings, all human life, created as it is in the image of G-d. But even if we only cared about Israelis, this government is dismantling their democracy, keeping them in a forever war, and refusing to make deals to bring home the hostages who have now been in captivity for 700 days. The United States is the only remaining country that is supporting Israel in this war, which is rife with war crimes. Leaders of American Jewish legacy organizations continue to advocate for support of the Netanyahu government despite its lawless behavior and egregious human rights abuses. I know that Jewish leaders in this country care deeply about Israel’s existence; I know that Jewish leaders in this country want Israel to have a future; I know that we care about the safety and well-being of Israelis; therefore, we must change our position. There must be consequences for the Netanyahu government.

Within the 3.8 billion dollars of aid that the United States sends to Israel is funding for Iron Dome and defensive weapons which protect Israel from Iran and its many proxies. This we must protect. But a significant portion is for offensive weapons, and there are laws in the United States barring the sale of offensive weapons to countries that use them to violate human rights. The Leahy Laws restrict military aid to foreign armies if there is credible information that they’ve committed “Gross Violations of Human Rights.” We have all witnessed those violations with our own eyes.

J Street has said, “Israel should not be held to different standards than any other country or US aid recipient...This is vital to ensure that US security aid is used to address Israel’s genuine defense needs, and not diverted to implement or sustain illegal, unilateral actions which undermine Israel’s security, trample on Palestinian rights, violate international law or contravene longstanding US interests and values.”

Israelis are asking us to help them stop this war. It appears that the war will not stop until there are consequences. We are the only ones in the world who can provide those consequences. The extreme actions of Netanyahu's government are severely harming both Palestinians and Jews. It is time for the American Jewish community to lead. We do not need any new laws to accomplish this. All we need to do is call for the equal enforcement of the Leahy Law.

For the remaining living hostages, for the love of Israel and Israelis, and in defense of our tradition, our values, and our humanity, we can do this. We must. The time is now.