

Chol HaMoed Sukkot 5786

October 11, 2025

B'nei Mitzvah of Jesse MacEwan and Romi Beckerman

Jesse and Romi, thank you for your deeply thoughtful divrei Torah. Though you spoke about different verses in the parasha and different aspects of Judaism, you both were taking us in a similar direction, and I want to see if I can explore a bit the points of connection between your two messages.

Jesse, you wanted to know why the fixed times on the Jewish calendar, the holidays, the festivals, and even the fasts, are so important in Judaism. And what you found is that these days are about marking time itself, to make rhythm and meaning in life; but that the Prophets make clear that from G-d's perspective it's not just about marking time. We are meant to actively connect these days to our whole lives, to more fully live out their themes of community, of responsibility, and of justice.

And Romi, you asked about what it means to not boil a kid in its mother's milk. And you found that though this verse was interpreted by our ancient Rabbis to prohibit the mixing of milk and meat, there are actually many possible interpretations of the verse itself – our medieval commentators suggest it could have been about the proper time to make a sacrifice, or it could have been about preventing cruelty to animals.

Both of you are asking about mitzvot, and specifically why we do the rituals we do— whether that's about festivals or kashrut. And you both found that what seems simple and straightforward – for example, everyone knows that Sukkot always takes place right after Yom Kippur and we celebrate by building a sukkah and we hang out in it for a week; or everyone knows that keeping kosher comes from the Torah and if you keep kosher you can't mix milk and meat – is actually more nuanced and complex. Yes, you are supposed to build a sukkah and dwell in it, but if you're not living out the larger values that it represents, and if you're not connecting it to your whole life, you're not doing it right. And yes, kashrut prohibits the mixing of milk and meat, but its verse of origin has other equally valid interpretations.

This has a couple of important implications. First of all, that Judaism, more than maybe any other religion, is inherently pluralistic. For thousands of years, our people have been interpreting and re-interpreting Torah, and allowing multiple contradictory interpretations to simultaneously coexist. Second, we're not being asked to mindlessly obey. We're being asked to engage with our whole selves. The Prophets are clear – it's not enough to just do the thing. The mitzvah has to have integrity, meaning it has to align with the rest of our lives. And in order for it to align with the rest of our lives, we have to understand what it's about, how it is calling us to live. And in order to understand how it is calling us to live, we have to ask questions, we have to get curious, we have to expect that there is deeper meaning within the mitzvah. And as you taught us, Romi, that deeper meaning is open to interpretation. It could be about preventing animal cruelty, it could be about connecting with G-d, it could be about connecting with the Jewish people. It could be, as the Prophets are bellowing, about living in harmony with our fellow human beings and the earth.

In our parasha, a second set of tablets are needed to replace the first, the broken set. Last time, the Torah says that the first set of tablets were inscribed by the finger of G-d. This time, with the second set, it's Moses who carves the tablets. Last time, G-d wrote and Moses stood and watched. This time, G-d spoke, Moses heard G-d's words and did the writing himself. This time, our tradition has it, Moses not only wrote what he heard but also heard even more Torah that didn't get written for centuries, for millennia, Torah that is still being written now.

The point is that covenant means that we are not passive. We're not just along for the ride or going with the flow. We are not blindly obedient. We are active agents, using our conscience to engage our whole selves, our bodies, our hearts, our minds, our souls. This human agency is modeled all the way from Abraham through Moses through the ancient Rabbis to now.

Today, this Shabbat, we might be nearing the end of a horrific war. We gather with so much emotion, at the possibility that the hostages might come home on Monday and that this war might finally be over. I feel, I think many of us feel, a wave of immense relief and overwhelming joy with the hope and possibility that it is really real this time. The images and videos coming out of both Israel and Gaza are so moving. We were supposed to have Liran Berman here tonight, the brother of Gali and Ziv Berman, twins who have been in Hamas captivity for two

years. Liran obviously cancelled speaking here tonight so that he could be home to welcome his brothers, we pray, in just two days. All of Israel has been holding its breath for two years, living inside of a trauma, completely stuck on October 7, 2023, until those hostages come home. So the idea that they might all come home in just two days is overwhelming. And the idea that no more Palestinians will die from this war – no more bombs, no more starvation, no more evacuations, no more tanks, no more shooting; the devastation of Gaza, the starvation of the people of Gaza, the wreckage of Gaza, the massive destruction of human life and habitation, will stop – it's almost unbelievable. It seemed like it would never stop.

Amidst the gratitude and relief and joy, I ask you, as people who have agency, how we are to understand this moment? Because what it seems like, is that this decision was made without the pre-conditions that we've theoretically been waiting for. Hamas did not agree to disarm. There was not agreement on terms about the governance of Gaza. Instead, there was, suddenly, the will to end the war, seemingly coming from our president for motives that might have to do with personal glory. We'll take it, whatever works. We'll take it. But if it was never actually about Hamas disarming or agreeing not to participate in the governance of Gaza, why didn't we bring home the hostages a year ago or more? Why have the people of Gaza been tortured all this time? If this decision was made now because two years is a round number, or because the Nobel committee is in their deliberations – neither of which are real, defensible reasons to fight or not fight a war – well then what could we have done, what could the world have done to bring that decision sooner?

Similarly, if we just watch and wait after (please G-d) the hostages come home and the war ends, what will happen to Gaza? What will happen to Israel? What will happen to the West Bank? Because, if we've learned anything from the last two years, it must be that what happens to Gaza and the West Bank is entirely intertwined with what happens to Israel. And what happens to Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel is entirely intertwined with our own well-being. And if the same kind of forces that brought us this war – both Palestinian and Israeli – are allowed to take hold or keep power, the nightmare will not actually be over. But if, instead, there is true peacekeeping, massive global investments, true healing and repair, accountability and reconciliation, and a real negotiation for the safety,

self-determination, freedom and equality for both peoples – well, then, another future might be possible.

Today is not the day to worry about that. Today is a day to allow ourselves to fill with hope and relief and joy. But next week or next month, once we've had a chance to truly celebrate and allow that relief to wash over us, and begin, begin the path of healing, we must remember that we have agency. We are not passive spectators – we do not just follow or blindly obey or go with the flow – and what happens next affects us profoundly.

So, Jesse and Romi, thank you for teaching us to ask good questions, to not just take the surface explanation at face value, but to engage, to interpret and reinterpret, and to connect the actions of our lives to the meaning of our lives, to live our Judaism with our whole selves.

As we sit in our sukkot for the next few days, as we approach this Simchat Torah, may we truly feel a Sukkat Shalom over our heads, and may our mourning turn to dancing.