Vayera 5786
November 7, 2025

This has been a big week for the City of New York, and it has been a complicated week for the Jewish people.

Many members of our community went to sleep on Tuesday night feeling dread, feeling abandoned and alone. Feeling like New York City has turned against us, that our city doesn't care anymore about the safety of the Jewish people, or doesn't believe that our ancient home deserves to exist as a safe place for Jews on earth. These members heard the Mayor-elect find it difficult in some interviews to condemn Hamas, or to speak in empathy about the victims of October 7, or to clearly denounce antiZionist language that incites violence against Jews. At a time of shocking antisemitism on both the left and the right, many of our members feel that Tuesday's election was both a sign and an acceptance of that antisemitism. This week is the anniversary of Kristallnacht, and I have heard from some of our members that this time feels like we're approaching 1930's Germany. If this is you, if this is how you feel, I want to tell you that I see you, I see how frightening that is, and I want you to know that you are not alone.

On the other hand, many of our members woke up on Wednesday morning elated and full of hope, feeling that New York rose up out of cynicism and despair and came together to stand for an affordable city that includes everyone. They are feeling inspired that a diverse coalition of ordinary people beat back hundreds of millions of dollars spent by billionaires to defeat them. These members heard Mayor-elect Mamdani repeatedly and clearly commit himself to join with the Jewish community to stand against antisemitism in New York City and they heard him specifically say, in response to fear that he might make Zionists unwelcome or excluded, that he would include Zionists in his administration and in his vision for New York.

And in the middle, many of our members feel uncertain, deeply troubled by some of the things that Mayor-elect Mamdani has said or failed to say, and while many see him as antiZionist but not antisemitic, they are afraid that the coalition that elected him includes people who are both antiZionist and antisemitic, and that his victory will embolden antiZionists and antisemites. However, some of these members are simultaneously excited by his ideas, and by the energy he is bringing to New York, and by his stand against corruption and dehumanization which is characterizing the politics of our country and our city. These members have seen him listen to the Jewish community and care about our concerns, even if he doesn't totally get them. They have seen him seek to

understand us and to work with us. This group might describe themselves as ranging from worried to cautiously hopeful.

This picture wouldn't be complete if we didn't add in our people's participation in two terrible and self-defeating dynamics of the last few months. First, several of the billionaires who funded the opposition to Mayor-elect Mamdani's campaign were Jewish, and the images and messages that came out of that campaign and that were promoted by many Jews on social media were deeply racist and Islamophobic. They darkened his skin. They lengthened his beard. They called him a terrorist. Their candidate laughed at the idea that he would celebrate 9/11. They purposefully mispronounced his name over and over again. They distorted his words, they took his words out of context, they lied about him, a lot. They fear-mongered. It was ugly, and unacceptable. Any association that the Jewish people had with those distortions, those lies, that racism and that Islamophobia was shameful. And now the Anti-Defamation League has put out a statement promising that they are going to monitor Mamdani. Of course it is their job to monitor antisemitism everywhere, all of the time. There's no need to publicly threaten to surveil the first Muslim mayor of New York City, unless one is trying to be racist and Islamophobic and wanting to enact the exact fear that Muslims have lived with since 9/11.

Second, the Jewish people turned against each other during this election. While perspectives in this moment didn't entirely run along generational lines – there are Jews of all ages in all of the groups I just described – what we just saw was the older generation of Jews turn against the younger generation of Jews. Older Jews were actually called upon to try to change their children and grandchildren. Younger Jews were cast as wrong, as naive, as confused, and as insufficiently loyal to their people. This is a generational divide that isn't new. We've been seeing it grow for decades, as establishment Jewish organizations have demonized young Jews who've grown up watching a settler movement that's out of control, watching Netanyanu's corruption, watching the growing politics of hate and dehumanization that is characterizing Israel just as it is characterizing the United States, and who especially in the Gaza war cannot square what they are seeing in Israel with the Torah values they learned growing up. Many of them no longer believe that Israel should exist or should exist as a Jewish state. To those of us who are Zionists, myself included, those of us who refuse to give up on the dream of a Jewish and democratic state side by side with a free and equal Palestinian state, the position of many in the younger generation is devastating. Yitzhak Rabin was murdered 30 years ago this week because he came to understand that Israel's future had to be built, not on endless wars and occupation, but on compromise and coexistence. For many of us, giving up on that dream is not an option.

But the answer cannot be to turn against one another. It cannot be for the old to turn against the young.

In this week's parasha we have one of the best known and most troubling episodes. It's the akeda, the binding of Isaac by his father Abraham. Many of us know it well. Abraham hears a call from G-d to bring his son Isaac up to Mount Moriah as an olah.

וַיֹּ֗אמֶר קַח־נָ֤א אֶת־בִּנְךָ֙ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ֔ אֲשֶׁר־אָהַ֖בְתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָ֑ק וְלֶךְ־לְךָ֙ אֶל־אֶ֣רֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּ֔ה וְהַעֲלֵ֥הוּ שָׁ֛ם לְעֹלָ֖ה עַ֣ל אַחַ֑ד הֶהָרִ֔ים אֲשֶׁ֥ר אֹמַ֖ר אֵלֶֽיךָ׃

"Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you."

Hearing these words, Abraham didn't pause, he didn't talk to Sarah, he didn't talk to Isaac. He thought G-d was commanding him to sacrifice his son and he was willing to do it. He brought Isaac to the top of the mountain and bound him and lifted up the knife over him, until a messenger of G-d called out his name and told him to stop. But did he hear right in the first place? Did he correctly understand what G-d wanted of him?

The commentator Bekhor Shor says, **"**...Avraham thought that [G-d] commanded him to slaughter [Isaac] and to completely incinerate him. Hence he brought wood, fire and a knife with him, whereas [G-d] only commanded to bring [Isaac] up on top of the altar. [the word olah, burnt sacrifice, also means simply "to bring up"]. And from when he brought him up, he had finished and fulfilled the commandment of the Holy One. [And there are some who explain that *nisa [the word used to describe this episode which means test but also can mean lifted up]*, is that [G-d] raised him and lifted him and made him known to the world, how important he is. …This is the (correct) version.]" says Bekhor Shor.

I believe, like Bekhor Shor, that Abraham misunderstood this test. He correctly brought his son to the top of the mountain, but he incorrectly believed that our G-d would ever ask us to sacrifice our children. In fact, in Torah, our G-d is in clear contradistinction to Molech, the Canaanite god that requires child sacrifice. The point of this story is that our G-d will never turn one generation against another. Instead, our G-d seeks greater understanding and connectedness between the generations. As the prophet Malachi said, "On the great and awesome day of Adonai, hearts of parents will be turned toward children and hearts of children will be turned toward parents."

You might say that since Abraham was prevented from actually sacrificing Isaac, no harm done. Except Isaac never forgot. Isaac, the midrash says, was 37 years old when

this happened. Isaac, the midrash says, was blinded by the tears of the angels who witnessed this scene, and many commentaries see other scars on his personality from the trauma. After the episode, when Abraham leaves the mountain with his servants, Isaac isn't there, or at least he isn't mentioned. Did he make the journey back with his father? We don't know. We do know that Isaac never again spoke to his father. We do know that Isaac went to live in a different land from his father. It even seems that he went to live with Hagar and Ishmael, his father's other outcasts. And the next time Isaac had contact with his father it was to bury him.

Turning parents against children is no small matter. If we are hearing the call to do so, it is not G-d calling. Caught up in our fear and our dread, we are mis-hearing the call. Instead, we need to pause, we need to stop, before we do any more harm.

The Jewish community has been turning the older generation against the younger generation for almost 30 years now. The Jewish community has been creating litmus tests and loyalty tests for almost 30 years. This approach has not only utterly failed to change the minds of Jews under 50, it has in many cases alienated them from the Jewish people. It has made many feel that they have no home in the Jewish world, and many have decided that if they're going to be called bad Jews and self-hating Jews, good riddance. They're going to walk away. This has gone on for far too long and it must stop. It must be that instead we grow empathy for each other's perspectives, that we listen, deeply listen, not with the goal of convincing, but with the goal of understanding. And most importantly that we insist on including everyone in our tent, that we insist on remaining a single community united across our differences.

When we disagree and emotions get heated here at CBE we have been offering listening circles, inviting members to listen to one another across our differences, whether generational or otherwise. We have been intentionally growing our ability to disagree and remain in community. I try to make it clear whenever I can that our members can disagree with me and the other clergy and the other members and fully belong here. This is your home. There are no litmus tests. There is not one right way. I just received a request from one of our members that we hold a post-election listening circle, so look for that soon. In this time of extreme polarization, this might be the most important skill for us to build. This month, we also are launching a year-long multigenerational dialogue on Israel and Palestine. And next October, I'll be leading, along with our president Leslie Lewin and Rabbi Evan Traylor, an intergenerational trip to Israel and the West Bank, in which half of the participants will be under 40 and half over 40.

This is the work we will do within our community. And what about with our new mayor?

When Mayor-elect Mamdani visited CBE last month in one of the Town Halls that we planned for the leading candidates, almost 400 of our members attended and they wrote 82 questions for him. Half of these questions were about the governance of our city – housing, education, etc., and half were about the Jewish people, Israel, antisemitism and antiZionism. I asked the first question, which was really more of a speech than a question, as it encompassed the concerns of several dozen of our members about the phrase “Globalize the Intifada.” I spoke passionately about what that phrase has looked like in the life of our community – from graffiti on the doors of our members’s homes and of our synagogue, to firebombing in Colorado, to hostages held in a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, to fear that someone is going to come into our buildings with an automatic weapon to kill us. I asked Mr. Mamdani four specific questions about what he would do as mayor to prevent violence against Jews.

Many of us did not feel that Mayor-elect Mamdani’s response to that question was satisfactory, though he did condemn Hamas and October 7th very clearly in our Town Hall. Since then, a 2023 quote by him went viral: “When the boot of the NYPD is on your neck, it was laced by the IDF.” When asked about it, he said he was referring to training exercises between the IDF and the NYPD, which did happen. From the context of the clip, he seemed to be saying it with the goal of making the Palestinian rights movement more viscerally real for working class New Yorkers.

I’m expecting to have a chance to sit down with Mayor-elect Mamdani one-on-one in the next few weeks, and I will use that opportunity to tell him personally and directly what we needed to hear from him about Jewish safety at our Town Hall. I will also explain to him why that 2023 quote is antisemitic and dangerous to us. It conjures the millennia-old and continually-pervasive conspiracy theory that Jews are always there hiding in the background causing oppression. That no matter who has their boot on your neck, it’s actually the Jew behind the scenes who is making it happen. This is dangerous stuff, and it will not behoove us to ignore it or sweep it under the carpet. It must be denounced. I will also apologize to Mayor-elect Mamdani on behalf of our people for the vile racism and Islamophobia some Jews are directing against him.

And I will talk to him about working together to ensure that our people’s needs and interests are heard and met in his administration; about working together for a New York that includes us and includes everyone. He has repeated again and again that he is committed to our full inclusion. He has committed to remaining in dialogue with Jewish leaders, and we will of course continue to advocate for our people.

I want to see us be part of a new dialogue between the Jewish and the Muslim community. I want to see us create a new *pact* among all of the communities in New

York who are vulnerable to violence – our community at constant threat of antisemitic violence, immigrant communities under assault by ICE, Asian communities facing anti-Asian harassment and violence, Black communities living with the ongoing scourge of racial profiling and racist violence, the trans community facing attacks on their rights and threats incited by the federal government, and the Muslim community who face Islamophobic violence at their mosques and on the streets. I have no illusions that we will agree about Israel, and we shouldn't try. But we can agree that each of us deserve to live free of hate and free of violence in our city. And we can pledge to proactively keep each other safe. I believe that our mayor will want to contribute to the creation of such a pact. I am not pretending that this will be easy, but after two years of devastating alienation, I think this is a moment to try and I think this is an approach worth trying.

Some people are declaring that this is the end of Jewish New York. But looking around our thriving community, the unbelievable growth at CBE that we we are racing to catch up with, the breadth of exciting and engaging initiatives that happen here, and the thriving of our neighboring synagogues, and the minyanim popping up everywhere, and the energy behind the Center for New Jewish Culture, we know that this claim couldn't be farther from the truth. I see a Jewish New York burgeoning with life and energy and excitement and vitality; cultural and intellectual and spiritual expansion; and so much joy.

I am not saying it's simple or easy right now, or that there are no reasons to worry or fear, but I do believe that if we advocate for our people, as we will, if we enter into conversation with our neighbors, if we open up our tents wide, and if we turn our hearts toward one another – parents toward children and children toward parents across our generations, that right here in New York, the Jewish people will continue to thrive.

Shabbat Shalom.