

Vayeitzei 5786

It's College Shabbat, and it's wonderful to see those of you who've come back to visit from your college adventures. In our parasha, Jacob also leaves home and goes out into the world for an adventure. I hope that none of you felt, like Jacob, that you were fleeing home as you left for college, though that's not an entirely unheard-of experience for new college students. On his first night out, Jacob had that famous vision of the ladder with angels ascending and descending. As far as we know, he didn't ingest psychedelics, but how many college students have had some kind of late-night mind-blowing vision, and who's to judge how they got there? Like Jacob, you might have had a feeling on that first night of being immersed in the unknown. But before you knew it, you met people who share your interests – for Jacob it was these guys at the well who knew as much about sheep as he did. As they hung out at the watering hole, the conversation turned to dating prospects. And the next thing you knew, Rachel appeared, and Jacob leapt up like a frisbee player on the quad trying to help a girl with something she could probably do for herself. To add just one more detail in this highly strained comparison, Jacob learned to strip poplar branches to influence the breeding of his sheep. Lest that sound more like an Ag school than a liberal arts college experience, have you not also learned obscure and bizarre skills that will have no future utility in life? I will now end this painfully stretched analogy, for which you can thank Cantor Breitzer.

We can admit that there are significant differences between Jacob's experience in Haran and the experience on most college campuses. Perhaps most notable is that Jacob was not asked by a single person whether he was a Zionist! That's right, he went through 20 years of higher education without the topic coming up even once.

You may have heard that I joined Mayor-Elect Mamdani's Transition Committee on the subcommittee for Immigrant Justice. I joined because I want to support our city and our new mayor to succeed, and because I want to do everything in my power to help protect our immigrant neighbors. I also see this as an opportunity to connect CBE's work to the larger city-wide effort to defend and protect immigrants.

While I know that there are other Zionists on the Transition Committee, possibly many others, I also know that I am one of very few visible Zionists. In the first meeting, I looked around the room at an incredible array of skill, experience, and diversity among so many amazing leaders in our city. I sat there, proud to wear my kippah and be exactly who I am. But I also know that there are some circles in our city where being a Zionist is something difficult to say out loud, and I am worried that, like many college campuses, New York could become a place where Zionists start to hide who they are.

That's why, even though I know we're exhausted by this topic, I'm going to take some time now to speak to why I'm still a Zionist, and why I don't buy the arguments of antiZionism. I'm hoping this might be useful for those who are in college, and for those of all ages trying to navigate our complicated world. As always, you do not have to agree with me, in whole or in part, to fully

belong at CBE or to fully express your views here. We held another listening circle last Saturday night, at which about 40 of our members expressed the widest range of views, often with strong emotion, and people were able to listen to one another and then break bread as a community. That's who we are and that's how we are creating a community that can weather this storm.

The first and most obvious reason that I'm a Zionist is that antisemitism hasn't gone away. At the time of the first Zionist Congress, Herzl and the early Zionists saw that antisemitism defined the experience of Jews in the world, putting our people in danger everywhere we lived. In any country in Europe where Jews were emancipated and given basic rights, antisemitism only spiked. They could not imagine the degree of depravity of the Holocaust, or that almost every country of the world would close its borders to Jews trying to escape total annihilation, but they did see that spasm after spasm and wave after wave of antisemitic violence defined the history of our people.

Today, Nazis are back. Influencers and pundits are discussing whether Jews can be trusted and whether Jews are behind all of the problems of our society or just some of them. Synagogues are armed fortresses everywhere in the world besides the United States and Israel, and in the United States we're heading in that direction. Jews remain by far the single biggest target of hate crimes in this country. We are experiencing violence and threats of violence from both the right and the left, as we just saw a mob outside Park East Synagogue shouting "Make them scared!" Now, I agree that supporting Jews to move to the occupied West Bank, which is a part – and only a part – of what Nefesh b'Nefesh does, is wrong; and that Jews should not be living in the occupied West Bank at all. But I must say very clearly that intimidation outside of a synagogue warrants strong, direct, consistent, and unequivocal condemnation from our mayor. All of this is to say that it's pretty hard to make the case that antisemitism is no longer a threat to the life, safety, and thriving of Jews around the world.

I am also a Zionist because Israel is our people's ancient home. Though it's fashionable these days to deny it, it is a fact of history that the Jewish people are from Israel. Of course there's the entire Hebrew Bible, which is set there. And there's also the well-documented Babylonian conquest of 586 BCE, when that empire conquered our people in what was then called Judea, and there's the decree by Persian emperor Cyrus in 535 BCE allowing us to resettle in Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, and there's the documented history of the Hasmonean dynasty, and the battles in the Judean hills between the Jewish rebels and the Seleucid Empire in 333 BCE, and then of course the documentation by the Romans – who called the land Judea and Palestine and its population Jews – and who recorded their destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE as well as our people's exile and enslavement. That's how we got to Europe – the Romans took us there as slaves. Then there's the Rabbinic authors of the Mishna and the Jerusalem Talmud, all living and writing in Israel in the first seven centuries of the Common Era, and of course the Lurianic Kabbalists, who created the service we just prayed, who were all living and writing in Tsfat in the 16th century. *We are from the land of Israel*, and as we can see in our prayers, those who lived in diaspora turned their bodies and hearts toward that land for nearly 2,000 years.

The Palestinian people also have a long history in the land, and have as much right to it as we do. We can be Zionists and fully recognize the Palestinian peoples' right to self-determination, freedom, equality, and safety. In fact, that's the only kind of Zionists I think there should be. A lot of people who call themselves Zionists behave in ways that are utterly unacceptable. Extreme racism. Dehumanization. Violence and domination. The settler movement's daily harassment and violence against Palestinians in the West Bank is shameful and illegal, and we must demand that it stops. The horrors of the Gaza war challenge the limits of language. Hamas is a vile organization that should be dismantled and disarmed, and October 7th was an indefensible massacre of grotesque brutality, but nothing at all could justify the devastation that has been wrought on the people of Gaza, devastation that continues still now. However, terrible behavior by a country does not warrant its non-existence. What about all of the countries of Europe with their murderous colonialist pasts? What about all of the countries that participated in the slave trade? Including ours. We don't say that any other existing country should not exist. Why do we do that with Israel? We can be consistently and emphatically vocal against every wrongdoing of Israel without saying it shouldn't exist.

Some will say that they are antiZionist because Israel is an illegitimate settler-colonialist state. Settler colonialism is when a people are used to settle a land for another country's strategic goals. This theory argues that Jewish Israelis are the settlers acting on behalf of at first Britain's and now the United States's strategic interests in the region. You can see why this argument is so powerful. Let's be honest: the settler movement behaves a lot like colonists, as do the right-wing ministers and business people who are mapping Gaza's coast for luxury beachfront property. This behavior is disgusting. But to say that Israel itself is a settler-colonialist state is to say that Jews have no history in the land. As we've just seen, the Jewish people originated in that land, lived there for thousands of years, and when we were repeatedly conquered and exiled from the land, often in chains, we longed always to return. Name another colonizer on earth who came from the land they're theoretically colonizing. The whole definition of colonialism is that the colonizer is not from there. And name another colonizer who has no other home country on earth.

I am also a Zionist because Israel is not a theory, but an existing country with 7 million Jewish inhabitants. Those 7 million Jews deserve safety, freedom, and equality, just like the 7 million Palestinians who live there do. People say that they're antiZionist because they're against nationalism, or because they're against religious states, or because they're against ethno-states, or because they're against borders. These are wonderful ideals. But many of these same people are for Palestinian self-determination, which of course is nationalism. And many are for a Palestinian state from the river to the sea, which of course would be an ethno-state, with borders. And of course most states on earth are nation-states. Many states on earth are religious states, and every state on earth has borders. These wonderful idealistic concepts are being applied only to Israel. Only Israel, of all countries, is told it should not exist.

Finally, the word Zionist has become a bad word in so many places not only because the behavior of the Israeli government has become indefensible, but because for 20 years, antiZionist activists have engaged in a successful communications campaign to equate the word

Zionist with racism. A lot of Zionists are racists, and that is such an ugly reality, a desecration of Jewish values. But Zionism itself is not racism. It's a movement for self-determination for the Jewish people, just like the movement for self-determination of Palestinians. Forty percent of Jews living in Israel are Mizrahi, meaning of Arab descent, people who would be seen as people of color in this country. That doesn't mean they can't be racist against Palestinians – they can be and some are. But it means that American categories of whiteness don't quite apply and shouldn't be used. It is not racist to believe that your own people deserve a place to be safe on planet earth.

Right at the very end of our parasha, our ancestor Jacob makes his way home after his 20 years of – let's call it higher education – are complete. He's not the same person he was when he left home. His ideas are much more complex. He has matured and become a responsible adult. It's time to go home, and home, for him, is the land of Israel. The text says, וַיֵּקֶבֶת הַלָּךְ,

לְדַרְכּוֹ וַיִּפְגְּעוּ-בּוֹ מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים:

“Jacob went on his way, and messengers of God encountered him.” Rashi, quoting Genesis Rabba, says that these messengers were angels who minister in the Land of Israel, and they came to meet Jacob to escort him into the Holy Land.

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב כְּאִשֶּׁר רָאָם מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים זֶה וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם-הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא מַחֲנֵי:

When he saw them, Jacob said, “This is God's camp.” And he called the place “camps.”

Why does Jacob's language go from singular to plural? From mahane to mahanaim, from camp to camps? What if we read his pluralization to say that what it means to establish God's camp is to recognize plurality, to live in complexity, to hold multiple truths and to recognize our interconnection and interdependence with others? I can't pretend that that's what Jacob had in mind when he switched the word from singular to plural. But I can say that that's what we need the Torah to mean now.

It's not our job or within our power to tell the people of Israel and Palestine what the plan should look like for coexistence. Ayman Odeh, a Palestinian leader in Israel who serves as a member of the Knesset, is circulating petitions for a two state solution. Others are imagining a confederacy, others are discussing a ten state solution. The people who live there will be responsible for determining the shape of the solution.

Whether we're on a college campus or right here in New York, let's never be quiet about the terrible things that happen in Israel/Palestine, and let's never be ashamed to stand for the rights and the needs of both Jews and Palestinians. Israel exists, and Palestine should. Let's put our energy there – into doing everything in our power to support the people who live there who are trying to create a future of safety, equality, freedom, and peace for both peoples.

Shabbat Shalom.