

Kedoshim 5786

April 25, 2026 8 Iyar

Responding to Abigail Miller and Gretchen Greene

Gretchen and Abby, thank you for your meaningful divrei Torah on two centerpieces of the Holiness Code, which is itself the centerpiece of the Torah. The Holiness Code is at the physical center of the Torah, and it contains many of the central ideas of Judaism. Gretchen, you brought our attention to the verse that the legendary Rabbi Akiva said was the greatest principle of the Torah:

אָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ

Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Applying it to your experience as a theater kid, you see why it appears immediately following “You shall not take vengeance nor bear a grudge..” because when the stakes are high and you want to get that part and your friend gets it instead, as Ramban said, it’s natural and it’s human that even if you want other people to prosper, you still want to prosper more. And so how do we live up to this central mitzvah of Torah, to love our neighbor as we love ourselves? That’s why Hillel phrased this great principle in the negative – “What is hateful to you do not do to another.” *That* is possible. *That* is a goal we can live by.

Abby, you brought our attention to the opening idea of Leviticus 19. G-d says to all of the people through Moses,

קְדָשִׁים תִּהְיוּ. כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your G-d, am holy.

Rashi tells us that this statement was declared in the presence of the whole community because the fundamental teachings of Torah depend upon it. Abraham ibn Ezra tells us that if we don’t live by the commands that follow this statement, we will be exiled from the land of Israel.

Abby, you have a similar question to Gretchen’s. You want to know, how do we do this? How do we live up to such a high standard? You like that Oh HaChaim gives us time, allows us to be in process, suggests that holiness is a lifelong pursuit that we work on every day. It’s not about being perfect today. It’s about striving to improve. As you say, “It’s about treating people with kindness and respect and being able to show up for yourself, your friends, your family and your community and get just a little better every day.”

I read your two divrei Torah at the end of an incredible week here at CBE. Within seven days, we hosted six extraordinary speakers, launching three new books. We had Jodi

Kantor, Priya Parker, and Esther Perel here on Sunday with Jodi's new book *How to Start*, which is about supporting people who are starting out in their careers— and really anyone who is at a transition point – to find work that is meaningful and fulfilling to them. There were 700 people here for that most inspiring conversation. But today I mostly want to tell you about the other two events, because they were holy.

On Tuesday night this week, I had the honor of being in conversation with Rachel Goldberg-Polin, whose son Hersh Goldberg-Polin was taken hostage by Hamas on October 7, held in a tunnel for 328 days, and executed. While he was a hostage, Rachel became the most prominent voice internationally for the hostages and for their families. Her ability to speak their pain into words moved the world, as she tried tirelessly, heroically, with everything she could, to get them home. She just released a new book, *When We See You Again*, which is, as she said, a love letter wrapped in suffering, or a suffering letter wrapped in love. As she sat here on our bima, this room again had almost 700 people with tears coming down their faces, and no one was breathing, as she shared her extraordinary wisdom about grief and about love. It was holy.

Rachel Goldberg-Polin wasn't the only person from Israel or Palestine to speak here in this amazing week. On the previous Wednesday night, Maoz Inon and Aziz Abu Sarah came for our annual Hope for Our Future event. Maoz is Israeli and both of his parents, Yakovi and Bilha, were murdered by Palestinians on October 7th. Aziz is Palestinian, and his older brother Tayseer was tortured to death by Israelis when he was 10 years old. Through their massive grief, they managed to find each other and turn toward each other and become brothers to one another, dedicating their lives to peace between their people. They have a new book called *The Future is Peace*, and they say that they are certain that there will be peace between Israelis and Palestinians within two to four years.

They are not claiming that it will happen magically. They know that the way to peace is by people on both sides turning to one another, looking honestly and courageously at the profound pain they are causing each other, and deciding to stop.

Two months ago, on February 26th, the Deputy Consul General of Israel came to visit me here, and as we talked in my study, he asked me if I had a message for him to take back to Jerusalem. I said, "Stop. Stop dehumanizing Palestinians, stop abusing Palestinians, stop flattening their homes and schools, uprooting their trees, stealing their land, threatening their lives, and killing them. When settlers do this, punish them." Do not stand idly by.

Do you know what's another commandment in this week's parasha?

לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂק אֶת־רֵעֶךָ

Do not oppress your neighbor.

Do you know what another commandment is in this Holiness Code at the center of Torah?

לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל־דַּם רֵעֶךָ

Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.

I wrote an op/ed in USA Today two weeks ago about the disgusting settler violence rampaging through the West Bank, and in it I quoted your Hillel teaching, Gretchen: “What is hateful to you do not do to another.” But I easily could have quoted this week’s parasha. Because it’s not only the settlers that are the problem. The Israeli Defense Forces have been infected with their Kahanist (meaning racist, supremacist) ideology, and routinely collaborate with, stand idly by their violence, and refuse to arrest them for their crimes.

You might have seen the news story this week of the Israeli soldier who sledgehammered a statue of Jesus in Lebanon and was promptly disciplined. Attacking a statue of Jesus is not only wrong in every way, but it’s also offensive to the world’s Christians, some of whom support this Israeli government. On that same day, Israeli settlers shot up a boys’ school near Ramallah in the West Bank, killing a 14 year old boy and a 32 year old parent at the school, and then the soldiers came and started attacking the Palestinians, not the settlers, who so far have faced no consequences for those two murders.

Back in February, I said to the Deputy Consul General, “If Israel doesn’t change its behavior dramatically, there is no chance that it will continue to have the support of the United States in ten years.” I said, “I desperately want Israel to always have a close relationship with the United States. That’s what I’m fighting for. I want Israel’s behavior to be defensible.”

It did not occur to me that Israel and the United States would start a massive war with Iran and Lebanon two days after that conversation, a war in which schools and hospitals in Iran would be repeatedly targeted and Southern Lebanon would be bulldozed and occupied, and it did not occur to me that under cover of that war the abuse of Palestinians would only increase, and it did not occur to me that 40 out of 47 Democratic Senators would vote to block the sale of specific arms to Israel less than two months after my meeting with the Deputy Consul General.

On April 15, the Senate defeated a measure to block the sale of 1,000 pound bombs and bulldozers to Israel, but out of 47 Democrats in the Senate, 40 voted to block the

sale. Out of 10 Jewish Senators, 7 voted to block the sale. Then, just two days later, Rahm Emanuel, former White House Chief of Staff under Obama, former mayor of Chicago, a known Israel hawk, who grew up in Jewish day school and Israeli summer camp, said the following: “No more US military aid – financial assistance from [American] taxpayers – for Israel. You’re a country like all other allies of ours - Japan, South Korea, the Brits, the Germans. You’re going to pay full price; you can buy what you want, but you have to abide by the laws... the days of taxpayers subsidizing Israel are over.” In some sense it’s not surprising that Rahm Emanuel would say such a thing, because Bibi Netanyahu himself and Lindsay Graham, Bibi’s biggest supporter in Congress, have both said that they want to start weaning Israel off of US aid.

When Rahm Emanuel says “abide by the laws,” he’s probably referring to the Leahy Law and the Foreign Assistance Act, which prohibit the United States from providing military assistance to a government when there is credible information that that government has committed gross human rights violations. Now, these laws are not being enforced by the Trump Administration, who do not pretend to care about human rights violations. But they should be enforced for all recipients of US weapons equally. I have already spoken to this – during the Gaza war, I called for an end of offensive weapons to Israel until Israel meets the standards of the Leahy Law.

It turns out that Rahm Emanuel was speaking in alignment with a new position by J Street, which called last week for the end of US taxpayer subsidies for Israel’s military purchases. Jeremy Ben Ami, the President of J Street, wrote in *The Forward* that Israel is now strong enough to do what all other prosperous, technologically-advanced US allies do, and that making this change will actually strengthen the US-Israel relationship. Ben Ami said that such a change will end the allegations of favoritism for Israel – which, by the way, have stoked antisemitism and created danger for American Jews. He said it will also enable better oversight to ensure that Israel is following the law, and it will recognize a more equal footing between Israel and the United States, one that respects Israel’s independence.

I’m a rabbi, not a military expert. I actually do not know if Israel has the resources for all of the defensive weapons it needs. And Israel needs a fully equipped Iron Dome and other defensive systems. But if it does have adequate resources, perhaps it is time.

The hard left of the Democratic party and the MAGA right isolationists of the Republican party have dangerously joined together in a full rejection of Israel. They run conspiracy theories that Israel and Jews are actually controlling America. Conspiracy theories rife with antisemitism. They want to say that Israel is not an ally. They want to block access to defensive weapons. They don’t want Israel to be able to buy even Iron Dome, so

Israel cannot defend its civilians. I fully reject this position. Israel has very real enemies—the Iranian government, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis—who are bent on the elimination of Israel and the Jews who live there.

Let's aim our policy on protecting innocent civilians in every country, whether it's ensuring that Israelis can buy Iron Dome and other necessary defensive systems, or enforcing the Leahy Law and Foreign Assistance Act equally among all allies to prevent the use of US-made weapons to terrorize Palestinians, bomb schools, or bulldoze homes.

I am a Zionist. I believe that given the Jewish people's history of never-ending pogroms, given the Holocaust just 80 years ago in which there was a partially-successful attempt to annihilate us from the earth, given the current explosion of antisemitism everywhere in the world including here, given that year after year we are the single biggest target of hate crimes in the United States, given that for more than 2,000 years we have been the world's number one scapegoat, the Jewish people need a safe place in the world. Seven million Jews live in Israel now, many of whom are our friends and family, and just as Palestinians deserve freedom, safety, and equality immediately and forever, Jews do too.

And.... if we want our children and grandchildren to have a haven on planet earth, we must stop contributing to the evisceration of its moral core.

Wednesday was Yom HaAtzmaut, Israeli Independence Day. Israel is far from living up to its Declaration of Independence, which says, "THE STATE OF ISRAEL ...will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations."

This week, here at CBE, we heard from people who live there, who through grief, through love, and through immense courage, determination, and hope, are turning toward the principles articulated in that vision. May we here turn our fund and support toward the forces in Israel and in Palestine of grieving, of healing, of truth-telling, of repentance, of reconciliation, and of peace. So that one day, maybe even in two to four years, Palestine will be a place that lives up to the highest Muslim and Christian teachings of human dignity, ethics, and peace; and Israel will be a place that lives up to the Holiness Code of the Torah and the wisest teachings of our Sages:

Do not bear a grudge or take vengeance against your people,
Love your neighbor as yourself,
Do not oppress your neighbor,
Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor,
What is hateful to you do not do to another,
Be holy, for I Adonai your G-d, am holy.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.
Shabbat Shalom.