

Naso II 5786

May 29, 2026

After the Park Slope Food Coop Boycott Vote

When I look at our parasha this week, what I see is G-d's response to our people's loneliness. Here we are, a small band of tribes, in a desolate and forbidding wilderness. Why are we in this wilderness? Because a pharaoh arose in Egypt who looked at us and decided that we did not belong. And he concluded that therefore we were a threat, a danger, a problem that had to be solved. So he and his descendants oppressed us and enslaved us for more than 400 years until we fled. As the Torah's narrative continues, our people encounter nation after nation – the Amalekites, the Amorites, the Edomites, the Moabites, Bashan, the Canaanites, all of whom tell us, "No, you cannot come this way. You cannot stay here. You do not belong."

The response from G-d, YHVH, the Eternal Oneness, the Source of life and blessing, is to say, "You belong to Me." G-d tells us this just after the Exodus, right at the foot of Mount Sinai. And in our parasha this week, Naso, G-d shows us this through a beautiful blessing of comfort, protection, and love. It's known as Birkat Hakohanim, the priestly benediction.

Rather than bless us directly, G-d commands our leaders to bless us. This is G-d's second response to our loneliness. Not only do you belong to Me, God is saying, you belong to one another. Or HaChaim tells us that this blessing is not optional. It is a positive commandment not only for Aaron and his sons, but for the priests in all subsequent generations. Rashi tells us that the priests are commanded to bless all of the people, with no exceptions, and that it must not be done hurriedly or in a perfunctory way, but devoutly and with a whole heart. The priests were to stand and lift their hands before the people like this. They were to use their bodies as conduits. The Zohar tells us that a priest who does not love the people, or a priest who is not loved by the people, may not bless them. Therefore all priests were commanded to love their people and to display this love publicly, as an example for everyone to follow. G-d is saying: when the world tells you that you don't belong, remember: you belong to one another, and you belong to Me.

For many of us, in this time, being a Jew feels lonely once again. We often feel misunderstood. Sometimes we feel betrayed. Sometimes we feel that other people are excluding us, or are turning against us. We may feel like we don't belong.

This is happening all over the place, but on Tuesday night it happened here, in our neighborhood, in one of the most iconic institutions of our neighborhood. I know, we feel like CBE is the most iconic institution, and we're pretty iconic. But the Food Coop is a widely recognized symbol of Park Slope, and for many of us it has been a place that deeply matters. A place where we work for two hours and forty five minutes every six weeks, a center of our community, a place where we crowd together in impossibly narrow aisles reaching past the mass of humanity for the peanut butter until we realize that the person we're reaching over is a friend who is busy stocking the pasta sauce. It's hard to explain how much this crazy place matters to those of us who've been a part of it. It just kind of grows on you and becomes home. And on Tuesday night, it felt to many of us like our home turned against us, like we'd lost our home. After 11 years of working checkout, stocking broccoli and persimmons, standing in the dairy cooler with hands that were numb through my gloves, and filling little bags with spices in the basement, I resigned from the Park Slope Food Coop on Tuesday night. On the resignation form, in the space for notes, I said "I am sad to leave, but I don't belong here anymore."

I actually have an ache in my chest and in my throat. It feels like grief. I'm telling you this because my inbox is deluged with messages from you, from our members, saying the same thing. Two different members told me about suddenly bursting into tears in unlikely places. People are telling me that they can't sleep. People are stopping me on the street, distraught. It really hurts. If you are feeling this way, I get it. I see you, I feel it too.

This feeling of not belonging is really old in us. Not only from Torah. For the last couple thousand years our people have been kicked around the world, told that we don't belong by nation after nation, city after city, region after region. Among more than 100 expulsions, just to name some, we were kicked out of England, France three times, Portugal, Austria a couple of times, Hungary a couple of times, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Poland, what's now

Ukraine, Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and from Israel, the one place G-d told us we would belong, we were expelled three times, by the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Romans. The early Christians said that we didn't belong in the whole family of humanity. In Spain, even after we converted to Christianity we didn't belong. Just 90 years ago a power arose in Germany that decided that we didn't belong anywhere on earth and tried to fix that problem by eliminating us.

So it's not surprising that I, that we, have a feeling that we don't belong. It's what we've known. Maybe it's even epigenetic.

As I've been reflecting on this situation, I realized that we need to get very clear about what is going on here and now, in Park Slope in 2026. Because if we're not seeing clearly, we won't respond with the clarity and wisdom we need. And what's going on right here, right now, in Park Slope, is both confusing, and a microcosm of what is going on all across our country.

I gave a sermon three weeks ago about the history of antisemitism and the antisemitism that has been growing at the Park Slope Food Coop, as seen in a comment about the problem of Jewish supremacy in America and laughter when growing antisemitism was named. Some people misunderstood that sermon to be saying that anyone who voted for the boycott was antisemitic. I didn't say that, and I don't believe that. I do think that there's a lot of antisemitism threaded through the entire conversation about Israel, but the vast majority of people who voted for the boycott were simply trying to say that what's happening to the Palestinians is wrong.

We have to remember that in general boycotts are a legitimate, non-violent form of protest. Most boycotts are about trying to change an institution or a country that is doing something wrong. The language of the Coop's boycott proposal was not about eliminating Israel. It was about changing Israel. The proposal stated that the Coop would boycott Israeli products until Israel complies with international law and stops discriminating against Palestinians. If you were told that you could register your protest in a way that would make a difference in Israel, that would help remove this government, that would help stop the violence of settlers in the West Bank, that would move us closer to the establishment of a Palestinian state, wouldn't you want to be part of that?

I've received about two dozen messages from members of CBE – respectful, thoughtful messages from people who voted for the boycott. Here is one: “Dear Rabbi Timoner, I write to you with the greatest respect and admiration to ask that you urge restraint and reconciliation regarding last night's decision at the Coop. I can only speak for myself, but my vote to boycott was made with utmost consideration for my values as a human being, an American, and a Jew. It was not taken lightly, nor did it have anything to do with antisemitism. It was made to fight antisemitism. My grandmother was one of a few thousand to walk out of Auschwitz and I was raised with the old truism that "never again" meant never again for anyone. As you -- and the CBE community -- are such proud advocates for the humanity of Palestinian people, I hope you will encourage others to see the potential wisdom of last night's vote, or at least hold it with the respect and good faith that fellow Coop-tote bag schlepping neighbors might deserve.”

Here's another: “Hi Rabbi Timoner, Thanks for taking the time to read this, I imagine that you're swamped right now. Like you I have been following the vote at the coop. I didn't participate because I was conflicted - both in a literal sense (my shift was on that night, of all nights) and because the resolution as worded seemed to elide the broader issues with BDS but it still could be perceived as part and parcel of it. Candidly, if I did vote I probably would have voted for it because in spite of those issues I feel the need to send a message to Israel and I know that I'm not alone. Which is why I hope the vote doesn't make you think your neighbors are antisemites. They're not, or at least the vast majority of them aren't. I think most of them are like me, feeling like they have few avenues to register their disapproval of Israel (especially people who navigate mainstream Jewish institutions on a regular basis). Everyone just wants to feel heard and seen.”

This situation is extremely confusing. There is antisemitism at the Coop. There are also a lot of people not acting out of antisemitism. Meanwhile we are all busy interpreting each other's words, actions, and motivations in ways that may not be right. It's like a terrible game of telephone. Though many of us interpreted Tuesday night's vote to mean that the members of the Park Slope Food Coop turned against the Jewish people, that is not an accurate assessment. Many people voted yes on the boycott because they believed that they were sending a protest message to Israel that would change Israel for the better, which is

something we all want. It's something that we talk about here almost every week. So let's not walk around Park Slope thinking that our neighbors are antisemites or have turned against us. That's based on an interpretation of their actions which in most cases is wrong.

I want to say very clearly that it is not antisemitic to criticize Israel. Israeli newspapers are full of criticism. Israel's behavior of late has been indefensible. It must be criticized. The Israeli government is not coequal with the Israeli people or with the Jewish people. We do not want other people to conflate the Israeli government with the Jewish people and we must not either.

It is not antisemitic to protest Israel. The streets of Israel are full of protesters. We should protest Israel more. It is not antisemitic to try to change Israel. We partner with amazing Israeli organizations that are working very hard to change Israel. I would like to do everything in our power to change Israel to restore its democracy, to create full equality for all of its citizens, to end the occupation, and to establish a free and equal Palestinian state.

And we know that even some people who are anti-Zionist are acting out of what they believe is best for the Jewish people. Satmar Jews, for example, are anti-Zionist because they believe in a messianic promise of return to the land that can only be fulfilled by G-d. I don't agree with them, but that isn't antisemitism. There are Jews who are looking at the nightmare that is today's Israel/Palestine—the absolute devastation of Gaza, the relentless violence against Palestinians in the West Bank – and believe that the Jewish people are going to be better off if we don't have a state of our own or if we have a single, binational state. I don't agree with them, but that isn't necessarily antisemitic.

There are notable examples of racists among Zionists, like Itamar Ben Gvir, but I strongly object to the idea that Zionism equals racism or that all Zionists are racists. There are many notable examples of antisemites among anti-Zionists – you've got Nick Fuentes and Candace Owens, you've got people waving Hamas and Hezbollah flags outside of synagogues, you've got people who deny the history of Jews in Israel or who single Israel out as uniquely evil or hold it to a moral standard they apply to no other state – but anti-Zionism does not equal antisemitism and not all anti-Zionists are antisemites.

The one caveat is that we're all swimming in a sea of antisemitism and racism. It's the water around us, it's in the very air we breathe, and much of it is unconscious. It's safe to assume that we're all shaped by antisemitism and racism whether we know it or not.

If you're someone who thinks that the one Jewish state should not exist, that the one place on earth designed to be a safe haven for Jews in the context of 2,000 years of murderous antisemitism should not exist, you have an added burden of responsibility to be extremely clear about calling out the antisemitism that is running through many anti-Zionist arguments, to be extremely careful not to hold Israel to a different standard than other countries, and to be extremely dedicated to the safety of the 7 million Jews who live there, most of whom have nowhere else to go.

If you, like me, are a Zionist, if you believe that Israel should continue to exist as a Jewish state despite the Nakba, and despite its treatment of Palestinians ever since, you — we— have an added burden of responsibility to be extremely clear in calling out the racism running through many Zionist arguments, to be extremely careful to hold Israel to the same moral standards we would hold any other country, and to be extremely dedicated to the freedom and self-determination of the Palestinian people. In other words, I would like to see anti-Zionists care as much about Jewish safety as they do about Palestinian freedom and Zionists care as much about Palestinian freedom as they do about Jewish safety. Because only when everyone is safe and free will everyone be safe and free.

Part of why this situation is so confusing is because it is deeply complicated. Another part of why it is confusing is because there is intentional manipulation going on. BDS activists worked for a long time to achieve this vote at the Park Slope Food Coop. The boycott proposal that was presented Tuesday night hid that fact. It appeared to be about changing Israel, not eliminating Israel. But the Global BDS movement has as its goal the elimination of Israel. As I said in my sermon three weeks ago, its founder, Omar Barghouti, when asked whether the boycott of Israel would stop when Palestinians have their own state, said no. Even when a Palestinian state exists, the boycott would continue until every Palestinian who wants to move into the Jewish state next door can do so, until

Israel does not exist as a Jewish state, until there is no Jewish-majority state in the world. The boycott organizers also manipulated the rules of the coop so that after a full presentation of the boycott proposal, no argument could be made – no discussion was allowed, not one word could be spoken – against the boycott before the vote. No one had a chance to hear these arguments.

Because it's not interested in changing Israel so that one day Palestinians and Israelis can live side by side in peace, the BDS movement boycotts the very people in Israel working for justice for Palestinians. It boycotts Standing Together, a group of Palestinians and Jews in Israel we've honored here who stand together for equality, justice, and shared society. The BDS movement boycotts Aziz Abu Sarah and Maoz Inon, the Palestinian and Israeli co-authors of the *Future is Peace* who were here last month. After Tuesday's vote, the Park Slope Food Coop will no longer carry a product made in Nazareth, a Palestinian city, by Palestinians. It will no longer carry a fair trade olive oil made by Israelis and Palestinians together.

Here's what we know about the effect of the Park Slope Food Coop vote based on other boycotts won by the Global BDS movement over the last twenty five years. First, the vote will not accomplish any positive change in Israel. This terrible Israeli government clings to power by making the case that the world hates Jews, that among all of the human rights abusers in the world – including China and Russia – the world picks Israel as the one place to boycott. In other words, rather than weakening this Israeli government, it strengthens it. Second, it does absolutely nothing to bring us closer to freedom, safety, or equality for Palestinians. Third, it both boycotts and undermines the Israeli left, which is working for shared society between Israelis and Palestinians, but which is fragile because the right is able to say that the left are dreamers in a world that hates Jews. Finally, it hurts local Jews, who feel like they no longer belong in their beloved community institutions. For all of these reasons, both candidates running for Congress in our district opposed this boycott.

And that brings me back to my decision to leave the Park Slope Food Coop. Upon reflection, I'm not sure if that's the right thing to do. The truth is, we don't just belong to G-d and to each other, we also belong to humanity. Even though throughout our history nation after nation has turned against us, even though we've absorbed the message over so many years that we don't belong, we do belong in the human family. Just as much as any other people, we belong. We have to believe it. We have to claim it. We have to assert it. Walking away, running away, turning our backs doesn't help. It doesn't solve anything. We are tiny. We need allies. Antisemitism is real, but the answer can't be to avoid it – it's everywhere. We live on planet earth. We live here in Brooklyn, in Park Slope. These are our neighbors. As much as it hurts, as lonely as it feels, the thing to do is to speak, to act, to stay in relationship, to turn toward them, to keep turning toward them.

For right now, I can't be at the coop. At very least, I need time for my heart to catch up with my head. And maybe you're like me and you just can't right now. I understand. But I don't want you to use me as a model in this regard. I don't think all of the Jews should quit. Apparently there's an important board vote next month. And the Jewish people have just as much a right to low cost organic asparagus as everyone else.

Here's what I do think we should do. I think we should take this energy that we built up about the Coop over the last month and turn it toward the larger world. We're going to start a CBE Antisemitism Working Group that has three functions: first, education and training – to get smarter and clearer about what antisemitism is and what is not, about where it comes from, about how it works, and about how best to respond to it; second, support and guidance – to take care of our members when we experience antisemitism and to help each other navigate it wisely; and third, action – a rapid response team to publicly respond to antisemitism in our city and world. Stay tuned for opportunities to get involved.

If you're a coop member who is upset about the vote but has decided to stick with it, and you want to talk with other coop members about next steps, you can meet up in the lobby right after services during kiddush.

And let's remember that as hard as it is right now to be a Jew in the United States or a Jew in Israel, it's much harder to be a Palestinian in Gaza or the West Bank. If you are someone who is looking for a place to speak out, to protest, you have a place to do that. You can join CBE's Israel/Palestine Action Team, and you can both protest injustice and actively support the people on the ground working for democracy, equality, safety, civil rights, shared society, and a Palestinian state. The next meeting is this coming Wednesday at 7pm, and you can just show up. That is much better than this boycott. That might actually accomplish something. We're going to Israel and Palestine in October to meet them. Come with us. The trip application form is in the weekly email.

In the meantime, even in a time like now when we feel so lonely, so misunderstood, so much like we don't belong, even across of our differences from one another, through all of our pain, we belong to each other and we belong to G-d, the Holy One of Blessing, the Source of Life, the Loving Oneness that unites all that is.

יְבָרֶכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיְשַׁמְרֶכָּהּ:

.May G-d bless you and keep you safe

יְאֵר יְהוָה א פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וַיְחַנּוּךָ:

May G-d shine upon you and be kind to you.

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה א פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם:

May G-d lift G-d's face to you and bring you peace.

Ken Yehi Ratzon