

Shabbat Behar-Bechukotai 5786

May 9, 2026 22 Iyyar

Responding to Maya Friedman and Susanna Mindlin

Maya and Susanna, thank you for two truly excellent, next-level divrei Torah. You both focused on the *tokhekha* section in Parashat Bechukotai, a section so terrifying and terrible that it is traditional to chant the words in a whisper, and many congregations avoid reading it altogether. Your two teachings on this same section are each thought-provoking and important, and I hear them to be in conversation with one another.

Maya, given that these curses are understood to be punishments for wrong behavior, you asked why G-d gave us free will if our actions have the potential to ruin the world that G-d created. From studying Heschel and Rambam, you found that absolute human free will is essential for moral responsibility, and G-d is seeking a morally responsible partner in completing the work of creation. As you said, “We can either mess up the world or make it flourish... and the goal is to make choices that help our community thrive.” Beautiful.

Susanna, you took on the question of whether *tokhekha*, which in this parasha is punishment, but becomes in Jewish tradition verbal rebuke, can ever serve a beneficial purpose. You found, in the fact that we are commanded to rebuke one another, and in Rabbi Chanina’s teaching that “Jerusalem fell because the people did not rebuke each other” that, in your words, “rebuke and accountability are the very essence of a functioning society.” You also looked into the many teachings about how and when and under what conditions rebuke should take place to ensure that it is effective. For example, one must never shame another person with rebuke.

So Maya, you found that we have free will so that we can learn to become the morally responsible partners G-d needs to redeem the world. And Susanna, you found that one of the essential tools in our maturation process toward moral responsibility is rebuke. Susanna, you then suggest that your generation is growing up in a modern version of the curses G-d threatens in the portion – a world saturated with violence, corruption, xenophobia, arrogance, and distrust. And if this is the case, then these conditions serve, as you say, “as a call to

action for onlookers, placing us on a duty to rebuke others, for the sake of our collective wellbeing.” However, you continue, “We cannot solve these problems simply by denouncing our fellow citizens.” Instead, you say, we must rebuke according to the careful process described in our tradition.

I love that you taught that rather than act angrily or give up hope, “to reproach (and through this, to care for) your country when you see it failing, and in this to have faith in its rehabilitation, is one of the bravest and most patriotic things you can do.” You have described beautifully how I feel – how many of us feel – about the United States, and also about Israel.

Maya and Susanna, here is why your combined message is so important. Being human is confusing. We are shaped by our emotions, by the values, teachings, and assumptions of our environment, and sometimes by people who try to manipulate us. Sometimes we know we’re doing the wrong thing, but often it’s not obvious what the right thing is. Which is why, even if it’s uncomfortable, we are dependent upon each other for rebuke.

Take for example, unconscious bias. Studies show incontrovertibly that people carry biases that they are unaware of about others, and that those biases affect their treatment of people against whom they have the bias. In such a situation, because they’re not conscious of their bias, they may act against a group and believe they are doing the right thing. It has been proven that this happens with racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and antisemitism.

Of these, antisemitism is most confusing and least understood. What is antisemitism exactly? Antisemitism is a conspiracy theory that Jews are causing the problems of the world. It can be the belief that Jews are *the biggest* problem in the world. It can be the belief that the world would be better off or even perfected if Jews were not in the world. And it can be the belief that Jews are behind any particular problem that you face.

Though it began a few hundred years earlier, antisemitism really took off at the beginning of Christianity and then Islam, when Jews did not accept Jesus as their savior or Mohammed as their prophet. When these religions were getting started, their founders expected Jews to jump on board and convert, and when our ancestors did not, they were furious. Christianity went so far as to blame Jews for

Jesus's death, and to assert that Jews are the primary obstacle to the redemption of the world, two false claims that continue to be believed around the world today. Early Christians also started the idea that Jews are greedy, that Jews are rich, and that Jews are sneaky and dishonest about money, which led to the idea that Jews secretly control the banks and the entire system of international finance.

So it's not surprising that Jews are frequently blamed for capitalism. There are cartoons about this, there are books about this, there are even forged books written by non-Jews pretending to be Jews explaining their secret control of global finances and their plot to take over the world. The most famous of these is the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which has been translated into 16 major languages and is in 9 distinct Arabic translations. There are currently millions of copies of the *Protocols* in distribution, and many people believe it to be real.

Even if we know that this is antisemitic, we all have distorted ideas about Jews and money. Do you find it surprising that of the top ten largest banks in the world, not one has a Jewish CEO, and not one board of these banks has any meaningful Jewish representation? It's not that there aren't Jewish bankers, capitalists, or billionaires. There are. But these are individuals who – like non-Jewish individuals – represent only themselves, not their people.

Antisemitism is confusing because it morphs to blame Jews for whatever problem you're facing, sometimes even contradictory things. Not only are Jews blamed for capitalism, Jews are also blamed for communism and socialism. Another example: In the last fifty years in this country, people started blaming Jews for the transatlantic slave trade. And now, many people truly believe that Jews were the primary culprits behind the enslavement of Black Americans. There are books about this, but it is not true. And at the same time, Jews are also blamed in what's called the Great Replacement Theory, the conspiracy theory that Jews are secretly plotting to replace White people with Black and Brown people in America. This is *the* central idea of White nationalism in this country. As evidence for this conspiracy theory, White nationalists point to the role of Jews in the Civil Rights Movement and in welcoming refugees to this country,. That's why when the Nazis marched in Charlottesville in 2017, they were chanting "Jews will not replace us."

So are Jews the cause of the slave trade or the secret force behind the Civil Rights movement and immigration? Neither. Are Jews the reason that late-stage capitalism is ruining everything, or are Jews the secret plotters behind Democratic Socialists of America? None of the above. We are .2% of the world's population. One fifth of one percent. And we do not have special powers – other than those amazing space lasers, which are pretty cool.

Antisemitic violence is on the rise everywhere, and Jews are justifiably afraid. Consider the terrible massacre at Bondi Beach in Australia in December, or the Mississippi synagogue burnt down by an arsonist in January, or the car-ramming attack on Temple Israel of West Bloomfield in March, or the arson attack on London's Finchley Reform Synagogue in April. Or now, in May, the stabbing of two Jewish men also in London. The British government has just acknowledged that it has a national antisemitism crisis. The United States does too. Every single year, Jews are by far the number one target of religious-based hate crimes in this country. In the most recent example close to home, this week in Forest Hills, Queens, swastikas were spraypainted on two synagogues, a childcare center, homes, and cars.

So, when we talk about Israel/Palestine, we have to remember that there is an overlay not only of Islamophobia and racism, which are also real and present, but of antisemitism that is old, that is deep, and that is widely and unconsciously held. That brings me to the Park Slope Food Coop, our iconic and beloved neighborhood grocery store that is so much more than a grocery store. It is a community, it is an identity, it is, you might say, a way of life. The Park Slope Food Coop is a place people like to make fun of for its extreme Park-Slope-iness. There is organic everything. There are kinds of mushrooms you've never heard of. And cheeses that will wow your friends. There is childcare while you shop. It is tiny, it is crowded, it is jam-packed with niche products and most of what you need, sometimes. There are committees for everything. There are rules for everything. You have to work a 2 hour and forty five minute shift every six weeks. It has 17,000 active members, and I wouldn't be surprised if at least 1,000 of them are CBE members too. It is an 8 minute walk from here.

I need to speak about what is happening at the Park Slope Food Coop, and that might seem like small potatoes, but it is the hyper-local example of a proxy war

dividing communities all across America. A war that is laced with antisemitism. Over the course of the last year, a group called Park Slope Food Coop 4 Palestine have taken seats on the board of directors and the agenda committee and used those positions for the sole purpose of making the Food Coop join the international BDS movement. The monthly meetings of the membership, which a tiny percentage of members actually attend, have been taken over by this issue. The debates have been not just heated, but ugly. Last month someone said the following: "We can't keep making the same mistakes between [what] we did with the Nazis and what we did with other hateful, racist groups. Jewish supremacism is a problem in this country, and we will move forward as a country with or without this Coop." Not only was this statement made, it received applause in the room.

Comparing Jews to Nazis is never great, particularly given that the Nazis argued that they were battling "Jewish supremacy" when they set out to annihilate Jews from the earth. You can see this phrase on a Hitler youth placard in the Holocaust museum in Washington DC. Unfortunately, many of us use the phrase "Jewish supremacy" to describe the right-wing Israeli government in power right now, because sadly it fits their ideology that Jews are superior to Palestinians. But to say that there is a problem of Jewish supremacy in the United States is to say that Jews in the United States think that we are superior to other Americans and are controlling the United States government and institutions like the Park Slope Food Coop with that agenda. The first person to say that there was a problem of "Jewish supremacy" in this country was Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke.

Most people who support BDS wouldn't want to be antisemitic. They think they are using their free will for something good, something moral, something right. They are distraught over the killing of 73,000 Palestinians in Gaza and the reduction of their homes and territory to rubble. They are distraught over the ongoing occupation and oppression of Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, who are now subjected to unceasing harassment and violence by settlers. They are distraught by the racist and dehumanizing language and behavior coming out of the Israeli government, including recently when the Knesset passed legislation establishing the death penalty for Palestinians but not for Israeli Jews, and legislators showed up proudly wearing golden nooses on their lapels. We can understand why people are distraught over these things and why they think they are doing something good by supporting BDS.

And that is why this is a situation that calls for *tokhekha*, for using words to try to explain why this action is wrong.

If the boycott was designed to change Israel's policies or to create a Palestinian state, or if it had the goal of safety, freedom, and equality for both Israelis and Palestinians, many of us would support it. But the BDS movement is not that. The founder of BDS, Omar Barghouti, when asked whether the BDS movement would end when the Palestinian people have self-determination and a state, said clearly and directly, "no." BDS is not a movement for Palestinian statehood, or for coexistence or for peace. It is part of a larger movement for the elimination of Israel. We saw this movement this week among the protesters outside of Park East Synagogue who, instead of directly protesting the sale of West Bank property to Jews, a position which would have had moral standing, waved Hezbollah flags and shouted "Israel should not exist." The BDS movement seeks the elimination of Israel, the one Jewish state on earth. Meanwhile there are more than 50 majority Muslim countries with about 25 that have Islam as their official religion, and there are more than 100 Christian-majority countries, with about 15 that have Christianity as their official religion. But there's just one Jewish one. And yes, that Jewish one needs to change, immediately, desperately – like some of the Muslim and Christian countries need to change – but that one Jewish country needs to exist.

Given the global antisemitism I've just described, eliminating the one place on earth designed to be a safe haven for Jews is not OK. And not necessary. We protest and boycott countries and companies all the time without calling for their elimination – China, Amazon corporation, the United States. We seek to change them, not to end their existence. We must ask ourselves why is it different with Israel? We must ask ourselves whether, given 2,000 years of a steady drumbeat of antisemitism, we might be unconsciously acting out of bias.

The BDS movement is not just wrong. It is ineffective, it is counterproductive, and it harms Jews who live here. It is ineffective because it does nothing to apply pressure on Israel to change. In this case, the Coop carries one product on the BDS target list. It is a kind of bell pepper that is only carried seasonally. In total there are eight products at the Coop produced in Israel/Palestine, some of which are Palestinian or fair trade products. Obviously this boycott will not have an impact on the Israeli economy. The BDS movement is not only wrong and

ineffective, it is also counterproductive. The hard right in Israel is clinging to power by making the case that the world hates Jews. The left in Israel, which works for justice and equality for Palestinians, is weakened every time the government can point to an example like this one, which would be particularly useful for the right wing in Israel. “You see? The world is against us. Even in a place like Brooklyn they hate us.” Though aligning with BDS will not hurt the Israeli government, it will hurt many Jews right here, who will feel like their community has turned on them, like they have no place at the Coop anymore.

I have probably spoken more forcefully and frequently for Palestinian freedom than any other leader in Park Slope. I was arrested in front of the Israeli consulate. Two weeks ago I spoke of phasing out US military aid for Israel. But if this passes, I would have to resign from the Coop. And I suspect that many other CBE members would as well.

Most people who support BDS are not seeking to strengthen the Israeli government, or to hurt the Israeli left, or to harm their Jewish neighbors, or even to eliminate Israel, or to participate in antisemitism. Many BDS supporters are Jewish. I am sure that there are people who support BDS within this congregation – and as we heard earlier in our welcome statement, they “belong here exactly as much as you do.” Many simply want to see the Palestinian people be free and safe and equal. I do too, but this is not the way. This way is wrong.

This proxy war for the war between Israelis and Palestinians is now dividing our local community into two camps. Here at CBE we have refused to believe that you have to be either pro-Israel and anti-Palestinian or pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli. Instead, we have stood consistently for both Israelis and Palestinians, knowing that 7 million Jews and 7 million Palestinians live in the land, that their wellbeing is profoundly interdependent, and that all of them deserve safety, freedom, and equality. We believe that you can criticize the behavior of the Israeli government and not be anti-Israeli or antisemitic. We believe that you can criticize eliminationist movements for Palestinian liberation – like Hamas, Hezbollah and BDS – and not be anti-Palestinian or Islamophobic. Many of us believe that if you want Palestinian freedom or you want Israeli safety, *the thing to do* is support the people who live there who are working through non-violence for change, for justice, for a shared future. Just last month, we hosted Maoz Inon

and Aziz Abu Sarah, two incredibly inspiring leaders, for the launch of their book, *The Future is Peace*, which is now in its third week on the NY Times Bestseller list. We gave them our fourth annual Hope for the Future Award and raised money for their organization working for justice and peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

Back at the Park Slope Food Coop, the pro-BDS group are well organized, good at turnout, and have been able to stack the monthly meetings with their supporters. But whenever this issue has come to a vote of the full membership, they have lost. Despite not having a majority – their petition to boycott after years of gathering signatures has about 3,500 signers which is less than 25% of the membership – despite this, they have continued to force this BDS proposal through. Though many people are working to stop this, it appears that at the next meeting of the Coop, on Tuesday, May 26th, two items will come up for a vote. First, to lower the boycott threshold from a 75% supermajority to a 50% simple majority, and second, to make BDS the policy of the Park Slope Food Coop.

Just as you taught us, Maya, though they truly believe that they are doing the right thing, these organizers are using their free will in ways that harm and destroy. As you advised, Susanna, I have used this d'var Torah to offer *tokhekha*, to try to explain why this action is wrong. I hope that people can hear it.

We have two and a half weeks to get as many people as possible to this meeting to vote no. We might need as many as 3,500 people. As I was thinking about this, I realized that probably no neighborhood institution has more Coop members than CBE. With more than 2,300 adult members here and a high degree of overlap, we have the potential to work together to stop this. I'd like to invite all CBE Coop members who oppose BDS to join me to do our best collectively to interrupt this proxy war. The first step is to register for the May 26th Coop meeting. The second step is to click a link in CBE's weekly email that's coming out on Wednesday so that we can work together to register as many of those 3,500 people as possible to attend the meeting (which they can do by Zoom) and to vote. In fact, lapsed Coop members can renew their membership for this purpose, and college students can vote too. If you'd like to help lead this effort, come see me after services or email me later and we'll make a leadership team.

Why is this petty, annoying fight in our neighborhood grocery store worth so much time and effort? Because it is part of something much bigger. In the end it is about antisemitism, a real and rising threat which ultimately carries existential danger both for Jews and for every society in which it takes hold. Let's do what we can to preserve the Park Slope Food Coop as a community for everyone.

In Parashat Behar, the first of our double portion this week, we learn the laws of the jubilee, which state that every 50 years the land was to be equalized among the people, and everyone was to go free.

וּקְרַאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ לְכָל-יֹשְׁבֵיהָ יוֹבֵל הוּא

“Proclaim liberty throughout the land for all of its inhabitants, it is a Jubilee.”

Nehama Leibowitz, the 20th century Israeli Torah scholar, asks what the word *dror* means here and why it is used instead of the more common word for freedom, *chofesh*. Leibowitz quotes Nachmanides who says it means, “to abolish the subjugation of the populace and their property.” Describing this kind of liberty as an independence that includes moral responsibility, Leibowitz quotes Martin Buber, who warns: “God allows fateful misfortune free reign to strike at those who yearn for freedom but do not grant it to their fellows.”

As we stand together for the right of Israel to exist, let us simultaneously stand for the right of Palestine to exist and for the right of the Palestinian people to be equal and free. Let us abolish all subjugation of the populace and their property. Let us proclaim liberty throughout the land for all of its inhabitants.

Shabbat Shalom.