Toldot 5787
4 Kislev November 14, 2026
Bnei Mitzvah of Malcolm Geller and Jonah Schnurman

Jonah and Malcolm, you got a Torah portion that everyone with a sibling has feelings about. Some of us are even PhD's. You took this pretty well known story and each gave us something we may never have thought about before. That is the highest and best accomplishment of a d'var Torah: to take our original sacred text that many people might think belongs to the past and make us see it anew, in particular make us see it in ways that give us insight into our own moment and into our future. Yasher Koach.

Jonah, you did something very creative. First you asked us to put ourselves in the position of Isaac and Rebecca, having to choose which child should receive the birthright. Then you set out to convince us – I think quite effectively – that Jacob deserved it more than Esau, even though on the surface Jacob was undeserving because of his behavior. You landed with a perfect pair of messages for us – when looking at a conflict, things aren't always as simple as they seem and it's important to look at different points of view.

Malcolm, you also brought us wisdom about this story. You drew lessons from the story of Jacob and Esau to apply to the conflict between Israeli and Palestinian people. I also couldn't help but read the story with the lens of Israel/Palestine this year, probably because as you know, I was just there with a group of travelers from CBE, including your dad.

Malcolm, you told us that when you read the parasha, the first thing you did was try to figure out who to blame, and that is what most of us do when we see a conflict. Who's good, who's bad, who's right, who's wrong. I sometimes wonder if it's because we grow up with fairy tales and superhero stories in which there is a villain and … a hero, a devil and an angel, pure good and pure evil, which by the way is not how the world works and is not Judaism. In Judaism there are angels, but not a devil. Satan in Christianity or iblees in Islam are different from anything we have in Judaism. One of the angels in Judaism has as his job to test human morality, and he is the antecedent to what becomes satan in Christianity – but in Judaism he is an angel who is part of G-d's court, part of goodness, not a separate force against goodness. Also, we don't have an idea of original sin– an idea that appears in Christianity that at our root human beings are sinful. Judaism says that all people do have an evil inclination, yetser ra, but it's understood to be something essential, something we use to take care of our own needs. The goal is to keep it in balance with the yetser tov, the good inclination, which is also within every

human being. So this idea of dividing the world or any conflict into good guys and bad guys is not a Jewish idea. Because as you say, Malcolm, “things are almost never black and white,” and “people and situations are more nuanced than just morally good or bad.”

We do have the idea that there is very real oppression and injustice in the world, from the Exodus story most notably, and we do have the idea that it is our role to stand against tyranny, the misuse of power to oppress people. And we do have the idea that it is our role in particular as Jews to not allow the oppression of someone who is seen as a stranger and even to love those who are seen as strangers, because we know what that’s like.

Israel is a country with a government and an army, and like any other country with a government and an army it does some good things and some bad things. And like with any other country with a government and an army, people need to be able to criticize the bad things it does. But because Israel is the only Jewish country in the world, sometimes it is seen as a symbol representing all Jews even though half of us don’t live there and have no ability to control or really even influence what the government does. Some criticism of Israel these days is so prevalent and extreme and one-sided that it just assumes that Israel is by definition bad, and that’s antisemitic. Sometimes criticism of Israel doesn’t acknowledge the intensely bad actions of Hamas and Hezbollah and the Houthis and the Iranian government, as if Israel is acting in a vacuum. And sometimes the criticism is so prevalent and extreme that it leads to bias against Jews in other countries, and that’s antisemitic.

Therefore, sometimes we can feel as Jews that what it means to be loyal to our people is to defend Israel from all criticism, or to care first, most, or only for the Jews who live there, because we feel that they are so under attack. It’s really natural to care first and most for one’s own people. It’s OK to care first and most for one’s own people. But in Israel, caring about our own people necessitates caring about Palestinian people, because Jews and Palestinians are stuck there together. There are 7 million Jews and 7 million Palestinians who live there and the only way either of them are going to have peace is if all of them have peace. And the only way they can have peace is if they are safe and free and have what they need. And so in order to be loyal to our own people, we have to care not only about our own people but about all of the people who live there. If we want Jews in Tel Aviv to be safe long term, we have to care that Palestinians in Gaza are currently in flooded tents with sand dunes collapsing on them. If we want Jews in Jerusalem to be safe long term, we have to care that Palestinians in Umm al Kheir in the West Bank are being threatened every day by settlers. This is my perspective. It’s not everyone’s perspective here, and part of what we’re doing here is

making room for diversity of perspective, so we don't have to agree to be in community and to be in conversation.

On the trip that we just took, we did some groundbreaking things in that way. We made sure that our group included a big age range – the youngest person was 19 years old and the oldest person was 81 years old – because we wanted a group with a big range of perspectives. We wanted to go through this experience with people who didn't agree with each other and we wanted to practice listening to each other when we didn't agree. We also made sure that in Israel/Palestine half of the people we met were Jews and half were Palestinians, and we worked hard to listen to their narratives, the different ways they described history and the different ways they understood the current situation. And most importantly we tried really hard to see them in their fullness. We wanted to get to know each one of them as the complex people they are.

A couple of weeks ago we did a big report back to our congregation and told the stories of almost everyone we met. Today, I want to tell you the story of just one person. His name is Abed Abu Shehadeh. He is Palestinian, and he lives in Jaffa, which is right next to Tel Aviv, within Israel. Abed led us on a walking tour of Jaffa, and while he showed us his city he told us his story. In 1948, during what Israelis call the War of Independence and Palestinians call the Nakba, even though it was an incredibly dangerous situation, everything was exploding around them, and many of their neighbors fled because it seemed like they might be killed if they stayed, Abed's family decided to stay. They survived, and he continues to live in Jaffa, in Israel, today. He is a journalist, a former elected member of the Tel Aviv-Jaffa city council, and an activist for equality and justice for Palestinians.

One of the most moving things we learned from Abed was his deep commitment to coexistence with Jews, to nonviolence, and to peace. He told us that he and his wife were distraught over the murders and kidnappings on October 7th, and in particular because they have young children, they were crushed by the story of the Bibas children. He told us that when he was recently on a panel at the Jewish Currents Live conference and someone asked him whether he supports militant struggle for Palestinian freedom, he told us that he got angry and said to them something like: "I have children. I don't want to kill or be killed, I don't want them to kill or be killed, I want them to live and survive and be safe and have a future." He told us that his biggest fear was the militant Israeli right, that so many people have guns and are ready these days to be violent, and so many Jews are ready to see Palestinians as the enemy, and he's worried about what they might do. We met with him before the election and he told us that even though he obviously is no fan of Benjamin Netanyahu, he actually supported a government that included Bibi, because he was afraid that there would be rage-filled violence against his

community by right-wing mobs or by the state if Bibi lost. His very real fear of state violence and mob violence was one of the saddest things we heard on the trip.

Exactly two weeks after we spent the afternoon with him, Abed experienced the violence he feared. During the night, ten masked agents of the police and the Shin Bet, Israeli security services, raided his home, and took him to prison. He was interrogated without a lawyer present and kept for five nights alone in a windowless cell. As a journalist he had been doing his job, covering the Israeli elections for Al Jazeera in Qatar, where he did a podcast with Azmi Bishara, a former member of the Israeli Parliament who is now based in Qatar. Israel accused Bishara of spying for Hezbollah in 2007, which Bishara insists is not based in evidence and was to delegitimize him as a popular Arab leader in Israel. The Shin Bet interrogated Abed about his contact with Bishara, whom they called a “foreign agent.” According to international law and Israeli law, journalists have the right to interview “foreign agents,” or people seen as enemies of their country. In Israel, it is widespread practice for Israeli journalists to do this. This is an important aspect of a free press. Some Israeli journalists have even remained in contact with Hamas throughout the last three years, and they have not been arrested. In fact, this was not even the first time Abed interviewed Azmi Bishara. So however you look at it, the interview was perfectly legal and not grounds for arrest. After five nights in jail, Abed was released without any charges ever having been filed.

There might be a different reason for Abed’s arrest. Israeli Arabs had a huge and unprecedented turnout in the election, winning 19 seats in the Knesset. Netanyahu blamed “foreign agents” for interfering in the election, calling the Arab parties “terror supporters” and “Israel haters.” It seems like Abed’s arrest may have been to make people think that Arab Israelis are dangerous, to delegitimize the big voter turnout.

It was shocking to our group of travelers that this person we had just met, this person who was so clearly committed to a shared future for both Israelis and Palestinians, so clearly committed to nonviolence, would be arrested two weeks after we met him. On our travelers WhatsApp we immediately got to work, thinking about what we could do for Abed. It occurred to us to reach out to our elected officials, including our incoming Representative Brad Lander. Brad responded immediately, researching the situation with civil rights lawyers in Israel, getting in touch with Abed’s wife, and drafting a letter to the Israeli ambassador to the United States. He was joined in the letter by two other newly elected liberal Zionist Jewish Members of Congress – Daniel Biss from Chicago and Scott Weiner from San Francisco. Their letter, citing both international and Israeli law, called for Abed’s immediate release, his right to know the charges against him if there were any, and the end to arbitrary arrest of Palestinian journalists by Israeli authorities.

Though he may have been released without the letter, upon his release, Abed expressed gratitude that these incoming Jewish Members of the United States Congress knew about him and spoke out on his behalf. He said that he was truly afraid that he would be kept for a long time. He said that in that cell he began to question his life choices, that he has done hundreds of podcast interviews and op-eds and articles and he's proud of them and he thinks they matter and he wants to live a life of meaning, but was it worth it? But his message upon release was "We must not be afraid." "There's a campaign to stop us from voting, to put the seeds of fear, to stop us from going and taking our part in the election. And I think that the answer to this is that we can't be afraid." "And the other thing is equality and freedom and peace… there are two groups of people on this land," he said. "And we need to talk about a better future. I think it surprised both my Palestinian and Israeli friends that after five days of incarceration this is what I would choose to talk about. Because I saw that what I went through is a direct outcome of not talking about peace. More violence, more death and destruction, more imprisonment. Because I went through this, I want to talk about peace. I want to talk about reconciliation. I want to talk about equality. Because I don't want anyone to go through what I went through. I can't help but think about the price that many people had to pay. And I also thought about the Israeli prisoners from the 7th of October. I genuinely thought about them as well. What they also had to go through. Some of them for hundreds of days. It's terrifying. It's something very human. And because of that, I don't want to go through it again, but also I don't want anyone else to go through it again. And I think the moral thing to do is to talk about peace, to stop this madness."

Abed has so much to teach us. I am proud to call him our friend, and I am so proud of our travelers for immediately jumping into action to help him. Once we get beyond the kind of thinking that one side is good and one side is bad, we can look more clearly at what is actually happening. We can speak out against injustices when we see them without being on one side against another, we can care about the suffering of both Israelis and Palestinians, and we can stand up for what is fair and what is good for both peoples. As Emili, our Palestinian guide said to us, please do not be pro-Palestine or pro-Israel, please be pro-solution.

This year, in studying our Torah portion, I came across a midrash I'd never seen before. If you look carefully at the parasha, Isaac actually blesses Jacob not once but twice. Once at his bedside when Jacob tricks him, and once at the end of the parasha when Jacob is leaving home. The first blessing is about power. It says: "Let peoples serve you, And nations bow to you" The second blessing is spiritual: "May El-Shaddai bless you… May you and your offspring be granted the blessing of Abraham..." According to this midrash in Shir HaShirim Zuta, "The first blessings were fit for Esau and the last

ones for Jacob." In other words, Isaac's plan all along was to give each son a blessing that was fit for him. Isaac had a vision that his two sons could live together in peace, with two sets of complementary gifts and blessings. The problem was that in Jewish tradition the character of Esau in Torah was meant to be a symbol foreshadowing of the Roman Empire, which lived by the sword and by domination, and that's why G-d had Rebecca intervene to prevent Esau's blessing.

Though Isaac's vision of brothers living together in peace could not be realized in the time of Jacob and Esau, it did become reality in the following generations. On his deathbed, Jacob gave *every one* of his sons a blessing without exception. Joseph forgave his brothers for the harm they did to him, and they all did live together in peace.

That is the true nature of blessings and that is the true nature of peace. In the real world, in most cases, blessings do not need to be either/or. There is no scarcity when it comes to blessings or when it comes to peace. Instead, *blessings live within the interdependence between people. Blessings live within the act of seeing our inescapable mutuality*.

Last week we had this kind of welcome vision unfold before us in our own country, which was suddenly no longer red states and blue states, but Americans trying to find their way to end corruption, to make life affordable, and to stop scapegoating. Instead, maybe, just maybe, we could begin to believe that America, and even Israel/Palestine, have enough blessings to go around.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom.