

The Narrative of Compassion

Last year on Yom Kippur, I spoke about the broken communal narrative on Israel within the American Jewish community. I spoke about what should be a rich and complex discourse having devolved into a constant negotiation of which "side" one is on, and the constant pressure to choose sides, to take a position and then defend that position against all challenges. The other option is silence, or simply walking away, disengaging. Thinking about this in context of this morning's Torah portion, the ancient Yom Kippur ritual, I imagined Israel as our communal scapegoat, bearing the overwhelming burden of our hopes, our fears, our questions, our judgments, our confusion.

After the holidays last year, I offered a class on creating a new narrative, one that would help us approach this issue in a new way. It was a wonderful experience - about 40 CDT members and a few guests came to the first class, and a hardy crew of about 25 people saw it through to the end. I do have to report that we did not emerge with a new narrative; that will remain our messianic ideal. What we did do, however, was an important first step. Together we explored some of our earliest Jewish narratives about the land of Israel--known in the Bible as Canaan, as "a land of milk and honey," as a "good land" (interestingly, it is never referred to as "the holy land"). We explored how connection to the land was central to early Israelite understandings of what it meant to be in covenant with God and with one another, how the land became the space in which the promise of the covenant could be realized.

We then explored our earliest narratives about exile, about the loss of that land, and how that narrative shaped much of Jewish thought from the later Biblical period up through the rabbinic and medieval periods, into the modern era. This was an incredibly rich exploration, the ways in which exile from the land--an exile that was linked, both in Biblical and rabbinic writings, to a kind of spiritual exile--how this became a central motif for many Jewish thinkers over history, even those who, ironically, could have lived in the land of Israel if they wanted, but chose not to. We explored the ways in which destruction and exile were in fact central to the evolution of Judaism from a Temple-based culture to a culture organized around learning, even as Jewish liturgy and poetry remained focused on an imagined "return to Zion."

When I asked members of the class to reflect on how much--and whether--notions of "exile" or "diaspora" play into their own Jewish identities, there was a wide range of response. For some, the sense of exile, of being vulnerable, of being cut off from the land of Israel, is central and palpable; for others, the fact of being "in diaspora" is experienced not as something problematic but as normal and positive.

Turning our attention to Jewish attitudes about the creation of the state of Israel, we explored the wide variety of opinions that existed within the Jewish community before the founding of the state, from those calling for a binational Jewish-Arab entity to those who declared themselves anti-Zionists to those who looked forward to the fulfillment of Jewish

destiny and indeed of the highest universal ideals in the creation of a Jewish homeland to those who saw a Jewish state as the only answer to persistent anti-Semitism.

One of my favorite moments of the class was hearing the discussion around the tables as groups of five or six people debated the creation of a Jewish state, each person having taken on one of these opinions, whether or not it corresponded to his or her own beliefs. It was exhilarating to me to hear the wide-ranging discussion, and the possibility of passionate, highly contradictory views being voiced without vitriol, free of the anger and defensiveness that so easily arises when the topic is Israel.

We explored a dual narrative approach to the history of the founding of the state, using a history textbook that places next to each other, literally side by side, a Palestinian version and an Israeli version of events. We experienced the crevasse that exists between these two narratives, even in a book that was a joint creation of Palestinian and Israeli educators committed to coexistence and dialogue. We talked about how these are narratives of the past; and wondered, is it possible to create a new narrative of the present, or perhaps of the future, of what's possible?

Most importantly, throughout our learning and discussion, we explored ourselves. We noted our reactions to what we read and what we heard; we tried to be mindful of our own speech and of what kept us from speech. Participants took risks in expressing themselves honestly, and then we explored together what keeps us so often from speaking honestly. At the core, we identified a fear or a pain around not belonging – of being told I'm not a good Jew, I'm not a moral person, I'm not progressive--a fear of exclusion, of having some aspect of ourselves denied.

This summer, as hostilities between Israel and Gaza broke out, all those obstacles to true conversation came to the fore, fueled not just by painful events on the ground but by the emotional firestorms whipped up by social media. Angry Facebook posts, simplistic messaging on all sides, demands that each of us take a stand somewhere, and stay there--once again, the brokenness of our narrative revealed itself. At the time, I felt blessed to be in Israel, and not in the States, because instead of relying on newspaper reports and opinions being flung back and forth, I was talking with actual people and seeing some aspects of what was happening with my own eyes. I was blessed by not being on Facebook and having my reactions shaped by human conversations with complex people instead of by social media. I came back from my Israel trip not depressed or despairing, as some of my colleagues were (not without reason), but inspired to support those people whom I had met who are doing the hard, long-term, essential work of finding a solution.

So today, I'd like to suggest some next steps in our messianic quest to create a new, functioning narrative for the American Jewish community, for our own Dorshei Tzedek community. I'm not going to share my opinion about events on the ground, or tell you what to think or what to do. Before we can talk about what to do, we need to be able to address the issue in the most expansive way possible. Before we can express our opinions about how others should seek peace, we need to be able to pursue peace in our own backyard. To

do this, we need a functioning framework for discussion, and from there, our action for solutions can grow.

The narrative that I imagine is evolving and will continue to evolve over time. In this way, I imagine it sort of like the Torah - which is a collective document, woven together over time from disparate, often contradictory elements, over a long period of time by a group of people who were inventing the story of themselves. Like the Torah, our Israel narrative will be messy, filled with imperfect characters and competing views of reality. Like the Torah, there will be open spaces in which we are invited to make our own meaning and find our own stories. And most hopefully, like the Torah, it will be beautiful despite its imperfections--beautiful because there will be many truths in it, sitting side by side.

Before suggesting a new direction, however, I'd like to take a moment to look at where we are.

Twelve years ago, in the midst of the Second Intifadah, I spoke about the two narratives that tend to dominate our discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this regard, not that much has changed. The two dominant frames that can be found both within Jewish communal discourse and also within the larger American conversation are what I have called the "existential" narrative and the "justice" narrative. Drawn in broad strokes, they each go something like this:

In the existential frame, the conflict is between Jews and Arabs, between the Jewish people and those who seek to displace or destroy us. Framed as an existential struggle, the conflict raises for many Jews existential fears—fears that we will never be accepted as a nation among nations; fears of physical annihilation. These fears have only increased with the rise of violent Islamic extremism. In this frame, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is inextricably linked to world-wide anti-Semitism and to the failure of much of the world to understand, or sympathize with, the Zionist project.

Most profoundly, this “us vs. them” narrative evokes a long history of Jewish existential struggles, centuries of Jewish suffering at the hands of those who in some way did not want us to exist. In the existential narrative, the state of Israel is not only felt to be key to the survival of the Jewish people, but it takes on the symbolic power of standing in for the Jewish people. Thus any kind of attack on it - whether physical or verbal - becomes an assault on our very existence.

By contrast, in what I call the "justice narrative," the categories are not "Jew vs. enemy" but rather oppressor versus oppressed, in which Israel--and by extension the organized Jewish community--is the oppressor, and Palestinians (and their supporters) the oppressed. In this narrative, categories used to analyze other global struggles are used to frame the situation--narratives of colonialism and national liberation, narratives of racism and the fight against racism. The struggle for Palestinian liberation against Israeli occupation is thus at its core a matter of morality, of choosing to be on the side of justice versus injustice.

My insight when I first thought about these two narratives is that it is impossible for someone inhabiting one to have any kind of real conversation with someone in the other. There are simply no terms in common. From one perspective, if you disagree with me, then you are hostile to the very existence of the Jewish people. From the other, if you disagree with me, then you are immoral. There is very little room left for productive discourse.

The problem with these narratives is not that they don't contain any truth. There is truth in both. Jewish existence over the millennia has been precarious at times, and anti-Semitism is real. Israelis do suffer actual harm, and many Israelis feel that the continued existence of their state is precarious.

And at the same time, there is powerful truth to the justice narrative. The Palestinian people suffer terribly under occupation, and there are profound injustices experienced every day not just by Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, but by non-Jewish citizens of the state of Israel. There are serious moral issues at stake. Because there is truth in each, we can sometimes feel that both of these narratives, or elements of each, vie within us, causing a kind of cognitive and emotional dissonance that can be extremely painful.

But whatever truths each might contain, both of these narratives are limited and limiting. They allow for only partial understanding of the larger truth of things.

With the existential narrative, real issues regarding Jewish safety and the threat of anti-Semitism become intertwined with an almost mythical sense of Jewish victimization. This narrative obscures what Israel has achieved in terms of its strength and stability in military and political terms; Israel--and by extension the Jewish people--become the eternal David facing Goliath. It is a narrative that both feeds on and provokes fear. This is ultimately counter-productive, because it is difficult to act wisely and effectively from a place of fear.

My critique of the justice narrative is that the complexities of the situation and of the actual people involved become obscured by categories of analysis that are not always relevant or illuminating. In addition, this narrative can play into mythical images of the powerful Jew that are prominent in the history of anti-Semitism, and it denies any legitimacy to Jewish claims of peoplehood and self-determination. Similarly, it often ignores or denies the reality of Jewish suffering and of Jewish fear. Ultimately, this narrative tends to feed on and provoke anger, an anger which can become deeply alienating and divisive, and as counter-productive as fear to finding any real solution.

These two are by no means the only narratives operating in this arena. There is a Jewish religious narrative, which overlays the current political situation with a messianic vision of the re-establishment of the Davidic kingdom. There is a Christian religious narrative, which reads cataclysmic Biblical prophecies onto the current conflict. There is a Muslim religious narrative, which posits a mythical Islamic past as the cure for contemporary political ills.

But if we bore down through all of these narratives, if we clear away the myths and the symbols and the foreign categories of analysis, we ultimately hit people, real people. Real

people who are not going anywhere. Most Israelis - Jewish, Arab, other - are not going anywhere. Most Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank are not going anywhere. These people have lives, have aspirations, have fears and hopes. However we understand how we got to this historical moment, the reality is that these people are destined to live next to one another, to live amidst one another, whatever the ultimate political configuration. The only way forward is to gain a deeper understanding of all those who live in this contested land, and to find ways to think and act productively for solutions to the problems that they face.

For those of us in the Jewish community outside of Israel, we have the choice of either remaining engaged with these real people and their real stories, and with the project of mutual co-existence, or we can totally disengage. Those are really the only options I see, and I would strongly suggest that we remain engaged. What is fruitless is to remain mired in debates that are made up more of myth than reality, that are more symbol than substance, that look at facts on the ground not as gateways to deeper understanding, but as self-selected bombs to lob at those with whom we disagree.

We need a narrative that will help us deal with this complex, messy reality, a narrative that will allow us to hear one another instead of driving us so far apart. We need a narrative that moves us beyond the staking out of and defense of "positions." We need a narrative that allows those of us living outside of Israel and the occupied territories to be part of the solution, instead of part of the problem. What might that look like?

In that talk that I gave twelve years ago, I suggested a new frame for a narrative - the frame of compassion. Compassion is one of the central themes of Yom Kippur. The Biblical word "*kippur*," or *kapparah*, was first translated into English in the 16th century as "at-one-ment" - which we now pronounce "atonement." I love this original sense of becoming "at one," overcoming separation. On Yom Kippur, we ask for God's compassion in the sense that we seek to overcome our alienation from the life-force of the Universe. We do our own work of compassion by overcoming the harsh judgment that estranges us from ourselves and from those around us. Ultimately, atonement is the work of compassion.

In a wonderful book called "Torah of Reconciliation," Rabbi Sheldon Lewis lays out a Jewish approach, based on Biblical and rabbinic teachings stretching back two thousand years, to the work of peace and reconciliation; what I would call the work of compassion. He enumerates a whole list of what he calls "specific strategies for peacemaking," many of which are relevant to our communal discourse about Israel. I'd like to lay out some of his strategies here as possible building blocks in a new narrative of compassion.

Rabbi Lewis begins with the instruction from Pirkei Avot to "judge every person according to the scale of merit." That is, when we see someone doing something we find questionable, we are instructed to give that person the benefit of the doubt, instead of immediately rushing to judgment. This has particular resonance when it comes to talking about Israel. When I hear something that angers me or alienates me, what if I were to give the other person the benefit of the doubt, to assume they have both a mind and a heart, and then endeavor to find out why they feel as they do? I might still vehemently disagree, but

perhaps I will be less quick to judge them as either dangerous, dunderheaded, or morally deficient.

The second step that Lewis lays out is self-critique, the obligation to seek forgiveness for my own shortcomings, and a willingness to admit both individual and communal sins. In the context of discussion on Israel and Palestine, I take this to mean that I need to entertain the possibility that I am not always correct, and to examine ways in which I have contributed to conflict and misunderstanding. In this context, I take to heart the beautiful poem by Yehudah Amichai, where he teaches,

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

Nothing grows - not understanding, not insight, certainly not peace--when we cling to our need to be "right." What it would be like to completely jettison that need? It wouldn't mean giving up on developing a clear analysis, or of being committed to certain values or insights. It would mean letting go of my investment in one version of the truth, or of needing my version to trump yours. Amichai's poem goes on to say that "Doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, like a plow." Being right is not productive or generative; doubt and love are. The willingness to question my own certainty, the willingness to embrace another perspective from a place of love, this will move me closer to real understanding.

Another aspect of letting go of the need to be "right" is a willingness to sit with contradictions and paradox. In our class, we acknowledged the pain of sitting with both the aspiration and the real, when it comes to Israel. We don't need to resolve or solve that pain; it is appropriate that we feel it, it mirrors the pain of those who are living precisely in that gap. Sometimes it is far better to be confused than to be "right."

The next component in the Torah of Reconciliation is nurturing empathy for the other; in the words of the Torah, "loving the stranger as yourself." This is a wonderful instruction, because for each of us in this conversation, who exactly "the "stranger" is will vary. Perhaps for some of us, Palestinians are "the stranger"; for others of us, it might be Jewish settlers in the West Bank; for others, it might be Jews who support the BDS movement or Jews in leadership positions in the American Jewish community.

This instruction challenges us to ask ourselves: for whom is it difficult for me to have compassion in this conflict? For whom in the broader Jewish community is it difficult for me to have compassion? And then, once I have been honest about this, can I follow the Torah's instruction to "love" that person, that group of people, as myself, because I know what it is like to be the stranger?

What is also wonderful about this instruction is that it reminds us that we need one another. In any given Jewish community, there will always be people who have an easier time having compassion for some parties to the conflict more than others. Instead of being frustrated by this, instead of trying to convince one another that there is something wrong if your compassion isn't the same as mine, we can celebrate the fact that taken together, our compassion is complete. You will do the work that I at the moment can't do, having compassion on those for whom I simply can't. While I think it behooves us, as part of our own spiritual growth, to cast as wide a net of compassion as possible, in reality that is difficult to do. How much more important, then, is it to acknowledge and embrace our different perspectives.

The next step that Lewis describes is a directive that we hear often in the Torah: *Shema*, listen. In order to listen, I have to shut up. This is not the silence of fear, of feeling that I cannot express myself. It is a receptive silence, a willingness to open my heart and mind and, as I listen, to be aware of my own reactions to what I am hearing. What pains me, or frightens me, when I hear it? What gives me hope? How might I most wisely respond?

The companion to this kind of silence, this deep listening, is mindful speech. We need to learn how to talk about these issues in such a way that we can fully own our own experiences without needing to demean or dismiss the experiences of others. We can learn how to avoid making sweeping statements about people we don't actually know--Israelis do this, Palestinians do that, settlers are like this, Hamas members are like that. We can speak powerfully from our own experiences and tell the stories we hear from others, all in the spirit of *Shema*, of mindful and powerful listening.

As an interesting companion to silence and mindful speech, Rabbi Lewis offers the Torah of reproof; the ability to wisely offer what the medieval thinker Moses Chayim Luzatto called "compassionate corrective advice." There is a midrash, an early rabbinic teaching, that says, "Every love that does not include reproof is not love," and "All peace that does not include reproof is not peace." So, we do not need to feign agreement with everything we hear, and we are invited to offer critique when needed.

The question is, how do we actually offer this kind of "reproof"? It is definitely not marking "dislike" on someone's Facebook page, or flinging vitriol in the direction of an opinion that we find disturbing. Rabbi Lewis teaches that reproof must be delivered "with utmost care." There is great awareness in Jewish tradition of the potentially destructive power of speech, and so there needs to be a balance between the obligation to offer loving reproof when necessary, and not damaging a person's psyche or reputation on the other. Reproof is also a two-way street; we are instructed not just to offer it, but to be able to receive it.

Learning how to offer loving reproof promises to be a challenging and important piece of shaping a new kind of discourse around Israel. When I am engaged in these conversations, how can I most productively respond to an opinion or an action that I find to be harmful? How do I preserve the dignity of the other while also speaking a truth that I deem important to be spoken? On the flip side, can I deal with my own defensiveness when I

overstep and someone needs to reprove me? Can I be open to learning how to better engage with this topic, how to more fruitfully share my beliefs and opinions?

I love the idea of a community collectively setting an intention to jettison the need to be right, and embracing the opportunity for critique, all in the service of deeper understanding. How much safer I might feel to do these things if I knew that those around me had made a similar commitment.

Related to the mitzvah of offering reproof is affirming the necessity of what Rabbi Lewis calls "compassionate, passionate dialogue." We Jews are an argumentative people, with a long tradition of heated debate. Rabbinic tradition makes a sharp distinction between two kinds of *machloket*, two kinds of debate: that which is considered *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven, and that which is not for the sake of heaven. I understand the phrase "*l'shem shayaim*" to mean for the sake of insight and understanding, and for the sake of ultimately doing what is right. Destructive debate is about personal aggrandizement, about power, about winning. Productive debate is about mutual learning for the sake of truth and of peace. In the Talmud, minority opinions are always recorded--because, the rabbis acknowledge, it is possible that in the future the current majority position will give way to what used to be the minority.

My favorite example of "compassionate, passionate dialogue" is the description in the Talmud of the relationship between two great scholars, Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, also known as "Resh Lakish." The descriptions of their friendship border on the homo-erotic, and they were known for constantly arguing and challenging each other on every point of Jewish law.

When Resh Lakish died, Rabbi Yohanan was disconsolate; he had lost not just a friend but his main study partner. To console him, the other rabbis decided to send R. Eleazar ben Pedat, who was considered quite subtle in his reasoning. When Rabbi Yohanan offered a legal pronouncement, Rabbi Eleazar would agree, saying, "There is an earlier rabbinic teaching which supports you." Rabbi Yohanan got angry and shouted, "When I stated a law, Resh Lakish used to raise twenty-four objections, to which I gave twenty-four answers, and by that dialogue, true understanding would emerge. Now I have no one to help me learn Torah. Where are you, son of Lakish?" And with that, Rabbi Yohanan died of a broken heart.

Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish are models of compassionate, passionate dialogue. They used their disagreements to get at true understanding. They learned by challenging each other. Like them, we need not paper over our differences, or become conflict averse. But we also have to be careful. The earlier part of the Talmudic story relates how, in the heat of one particular argument, the two rabbis hurt one another when the discussion got a bit too personal. Rabbi Yohanan became depressed, and Resh Lakish became ill as a result, and died of that illness. So while we can learn from Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish the importance of passionate debate, we can also learn the importance of taking care in how we challenge each other, to keep it from getting personal and hurtful.

The final "strategy" that Lewis discusses in his "Torah of Reconciliation" is the importance of praying for peace. Lewis writes, "An intentional act of prayer, focusing the consciousness of the individual on the theme of peace, has great power in the eyes of the tradition." For this reason, our prayerbook is filled with prayers for peace, scattered throughout the liturgy. What Lewis suggests is that the act of reciting these prayers can have a transformative effect on the one who prays:

"When the prayers have been completed, the worshipper goes out into the world carrying thoughts of peace. The hope clearly would be that the theme of peacemaking would then become a guide for living *that* day. If the act of the individual worshipper might be transformative, how much more so would be the power of a devoted community of worshippers who hold up peace as a cherished value."

This teaching speaks to me of the importance of intention. As we enter into learning about and discussing our connection to Israel, as we engage in debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we can transform our interactions if we consciously set an intention to do so for the sake of peace. In Jewish tradition, the word *shalom*, peace, does not just mean the absence of hostility; it is from the root *shalem*, wholeness. Our communal prayer for peace can manifest as a collective intention to engage one another for the sake of wholeness within our own community, within the greater American Jewish community, and for all those affected by this conflict.

We took some first steps last year, and I look forward to continuing our search for a new narrative this year. This will be ongoing work, an ongoing conversation that will yield new insights, new ways of framing the issues. It will not yield agreement on all the political issues, it will not forge a "new consensus" - because there never was and never has been a consensus within the Jewish community. We don't need to agree on everything. What we do need is a way to talk with one another, to learn from one another, to open ourselves to new ways of understanding that will lead to wholesome action, action that will address the suffering that Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and non-Jews, are now experiencing. Action that will lead to justice, to wholeness, to peace.

Osah shalom bimromeiha--may the One That makes peace above--hi ta'aseh shalom aleynu--may She make peace for us--v'al kol Yisrael, v'al kol Yishmael, v'al kol yoshveri tevel--and for all the children of Israel, for all the children of Ishmael, for all inhabitants of this earth, and let us say, Amen.

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Yom Kippur 5775*