

Shabbat Hayyei Sarah 5784

Joint conversation - Lessons from the past to help us understand Israel's present

11/11/24

RMS:

For many of us, outside of family matters and essential work tasks, it seems hard to think about anything else other than what is happening in Israel, from every angle: the massacre, the hostages, the war, the reaction of the world, the anti-Semitism, the politics and the unknown of what will happen next and how this will all resolve. It can be overwhelming. So before we enter into the content topic we chose to speak about regarding Israel, we thought that in an unscripted moment, but as a model for the community, we would check in with each other on how we are *feeling* about what is going on. A question we should be asking ourselves and our loved ones to give people a chance to express themselves and to share the emotional side of this issue.

[RAF and RMS answer]

RMS:

When something this monumental happens in the life of a people, especially a people like ours that takes our history so seriously, RAF and I thought it would be important to look a little bit into our history and to see what lessons we can learn from it to apply to today's reality. The lessons we choose to share are not meant to be seen as comprehensive: there will be plenty of lessons from our history not articulated. Such breadth would be a whole course. Today will be just a few that we will highlight that perhaps we haven't yet addressed from the bimah.

I would like to start by going all the way back to the Torah to learn a lesson that I do not think is obvious. When we talk about parshat Noah, we often debate the line about him that states that he was righteous "in his generation". Does the qualifier mean to compliment him, that even during such a terrible time of moral depravity he was righteous? Or does it mean to detract, "He was only righteous compared to his generation, which was not very righteous". Then we meet Abraham, and about him the Torah says he "walked *before* Gd". Many rabbis take this to be proof that Abraham is to be considered the greater *tzaddik*, model of righteousness. Why? What is it about Abraham, and the actions he took in life, that make him greater than even Noah who walked with Gd and helped save humanity? The answer is a subtle and powerful one.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "One answer, and a profound one, is suggested in the way the two men responded to tragedy and grief. After the Flood, we read this about Noah: Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. He drank some

of the wine, making himself drunk, and uncovered himself in the tent.” This is an extraordinary decline. The “righteous man” has become a “man of the soil.” The man who was looked to “bring us comfort” ([Genesis 5:29](#)) now seeks comfort in wine. What has happened? The answer, surely, is that Noah was indeed a righteous man, but one who had seen a world destroyed. We gain the impression of a man paralysed with grief, seeking oblivion. Noah finds he cannot carry on. The weight of the past prevents him from turning toward the future.

Now think of Abraham at the beginning of this week’s parsha. He had just been through the greatest trial of his life. He had been asked by God to sacrifice the son he had waited for for so many years. Then just as he was about to lift the knife the call came from Heaven saying ‘Stop’, and the story seemed to have a happy ending after all. But there was a terrible twist in store. Just as Abraham was returning, relieved his son’s life was spared, he discovers that his beloved wife Sarah, who had been with him every step of the way, dies. And Rashi, amongst other commentators, directly connects her death to the stress of the knowledge of what happened at the Akeidah. At his point, had Abraham grieved for the rest of his days, we would surely have understood, just as we understand Noah’s grief. Instead we read the following: *And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba . . . and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her, and Abraham rose up from before his dead.*

Abraham mourns and weeps, (in fact the Torah tells us he weeps loudly and at length) but then *rises up* and does two things in this parsha to secure the Jewish future. He buys the first plot in the Land of Israel and then he secures a wife for his son Isaac, so that there will be Jewish grandchildren, Jewish continuity. Noah grieves and is overwhelmed by his loss. Abraham grieves knowing what he has lost. But then he rises up and builds the Jewish future. There is a limit to grief. This is what Abraham knows and Noah does not. Abraham displays a well of resilience and strength that Noah does not seem to possess.

And Abraham, the first Jew, bestowed this singular gift on his descendants, on us. The Jewish people suffered tragedies that would have devastated other nations beyond any hope of recovery. From the destruction of the Temples to the Shoah to the moment of Oct 7th. Yet somehow the Jewish people mourned and wept, and then rose up and built the future. That is who we are. That is who we must continue to be. We continue to build and strive through our grief, through our pain, and through our struggles. Today we must advocate and take action to strengthen our people. And we must continue to build the future of Israel through celebrating our holidays, teaching Torah, and making our communities vibrant. We must learn from our history to turn from yesterday’s loss to the call of a tomorrow we must help to create.

RAF:

Something we must keep in mind is that, for Hamas, other Palestinian terrorist groups and their supporters - who are not all Palestinians, it's vital to remember - the core issue with "Israeli settlements" is not about Jewish neighborhoods in Gaza before 2005 and the West Bank today, but about *anywhere* in Israel. It's not about Ariel in the West Bank, for example, but Tel Aviv. Anywhere Jews live in Israel, Hamas claims to be land for a Palestinian state only. Hamas seeks to undo the borders not to the 1967 Green Line of the West Bank and Gaza, but the first Jewish borders in 1948. Remember that the PLO, the Palestine Liberation Organization, was founded in 1964. That means it wasn't a response to the Israelis controlling the West Bank and Gaza because that happened later, in 1967. They sought to undo 1948, having the Israelis control any land whatsoever.

Note that on October 7th, Hamas didn't attack Jewish settlements in the West Bank, but Israelis on sovereign Israeli soil outside of Gaza in Israel proper. For Hamas, that's what "settlements" are really about. That's what "occupation" is really about. That should not have been a secret in the past, but it clarifies what's really at stake today.

Speaking of today, we have all heard a popular phrase used by pro-Palestinians: "From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free." That's not new. But what should be crystal clear now is its devastating implications. It's not merely a rallying cry on college campuses and cities worldwide declaring, "Let there be a Palestinian state." Rather, it means, "Jews, get out of Israel - all of it, from the river to the sea. Not just Gaza and the West Bank, but Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Be'er Sheva, everywhere." And we must call that out as antisemitism.

I don't use that word lightly at all, but it's how the ADL understands this phrase, and they are the authority on the subject. Here is the ADL on "From the river to the sea."

*"[It's] an antisemitic slogan commonly featured in anti-Israel campaigns and chanted at demonstrations.*

*This rallying cry has long been used by anti-Israel voices, including supporters of terrorist organizations such as Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which seek Israel's destruction through violent means. It is fundamentally a call for a Palestinian state extending from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, territory that includes the State of Israel, which would mean the dismantling of the Jewish state. It is an antisemitic charge denying the Jewish right to self-determination, including through the removal of Jews from their ancestral homeland."*

I understand that Americans who are sympathetic to the Palestinians, for example, might misunderstand the full meaning of the phrase and think it means, "Let there be a Palestinian state," possibly even alongside a Jewish state. But those people ignore the full implication of 'from the river to the sea' which leaves no room for the Jewish state. It is this vision that is endorsed by the PLO and then the updated Hamas charter. Whether or not this calls for Israelis to be merely expelled on the one hand, or G-d forbid killed on the other hand, I don't know the answer. For Hamas and their supporters it's obviously the latter.

But both end results are obviously unacceptable and blatantly antisemitic. We must call people out when they use this phrase and share why it is so painful - it seeks to erase the Jewish state entirely.

In my vision of Israel, I see Israeli Jews living and working alongside Israeli Arabs, most of whom are not supporters of Hamas. I know many of us share that vision. We do not seek a state that is exclusively Jewish from the river to the sea. I only wish that Palestinians, their supporters, and their leaders could envision a state of their own where they live and work among Israeli Jews too.