

Caught in the Middle

Reflections of a Progressive Zionist

RH 2017 5778

As you know, our Torah reading for today reminds us of Abraham and Isaac. In many synagogues, the reading for the first day also includes Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael. For me the primary personage in all of this is Abraham. We consider him the founder of our particular heritage and faith. He represents the first individual to reject idolatry and polytheism for his acceptance of the One unknowable and non-corporeal God.

Abraham becomes an individual who is often caught between opposing ideas, people, or opinions. When he turns in one direction there are also opposing voices on the other side that call to him. But unlike the rabbis in "Fiddler on The Roof" he does not respond to the opposing voices by saying "You're also right."

His belief in the One God is a rebellion against his upbringing, his community, and even his own family. The famous Midrashic tale of him breaking idols in his father's shop demonstrates his minority opinion.

He tries to blame the broken idols on the largest one. He placed a stick into its hands after Abraham smashed the other ones. He tries to convince his father of the foolishness of his beliefs. But nowhere do we read of Abraham ever convincing his father or anyone in his own family, beyond Sarah his wife, who comes along with him without any protest.

The Torah begins Abraham's saga by telling of the calling he receives from God to venture to the land that will be shown to him. We might view his journey as his need to move on beyond family and community in order to pursue his own belief system which they do not accept. This is another example of how he is caught between his connection to family and the uncertain journey to an unknown land to be designated by God. His saga continues in an uncertain path having no children with his wife Sarah. Sarah offers her handmaiden Hagar as a surrogate and Abraham fathers Ishmael. Even though Sarah initiated this relationship, she becomes jealous and tells Abraham to cast Hagar and Ishmael out of their home. Later after Isaac, Sarah's son, is born

and Hagar and Ishmael have returned, there is another conflict and once again Hagar and Ishmael are cast out.

We see that again Abraham is caught between conflicting forces and probably feels very alone in making his decisions. Does he listen to Sarah or does he keep Hagar and his son Ishmael in his home?

This brings us to today's Torah portion when Abraham is caught between being a loving father to a long-awaited son and the call by the Divine voice to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. We know the end very well. He halts his action with the knife raised as an angel calls to him and God lets him know that God does not want human sacrifice.

At times, it seems that as Abraham moves in one direction or another, he is left alone as opposing voices or opinions push him back in another direction. His journey to the land promised by God seems to limit his human allies. He constantly encounters others but they hardly ever have the same outlook on life.

For me that sense of being on one's own, caught between opposing opinions, arose early this summer. People, groups and institutions with

whom I identified pushed back against my values. People who might be allies in one realm, turned out to be adversaries. While I consider myself to be a liberal and a Zionist, there were too many incidents when other liberals rejected my Zionism and in Israel other Zionists rejected my liberalism. Rabbi Robert Marx, founder of the Jewish Council of Urban Affairs, has called Jews a “people in between.”

This summer I read a quote from Rabbi Judy Cohen-Rosenberg who served as assistant rabbi at Temple B’rith Kodesh a number of years ago. She said, “With the suspension of the Western Wall deal and the rejection of a Jewish group at the Chicago Dyke March, I am feeling quite alone as a liberal, Zionist Jew.”

Her frustration, which I shared, was about a love for Israel, a country that often acted in a way against our own Jewish beliefs and practices, as well as in opposition to some of our moral values, and that same love being challenged by people with whom we often stood together on the lines to combat bigotry and social injustice here in the United States.

Lately, it is difficult to find allies who stand with my views both in regard to Israel, Zionism and pluralistic Judaism as well as the progressive

social agenda I believe in, here in our country and in Israel. Fortunately this isolation is not total. But in a larger scope of Israel, this country and the world, we are a minority.

This is not a new reality. This feeling not only exist for liberals. I believe that many Jews who identify with various political points of view often find themselves almost isolated in the middle of the many issues of the day.

For years when liberal or progressive issues have faced us in the US, many of our partners were members of other progressive faith communities as well as many groups seeking justice and equality against various forms of bigotry. At times, we needed to disagree on single items but overall our alliances withstood the pressures of opposing positions.

Over the past few years more of the progressive Christian community and left leaning political groups have struggled to support Israel and have turned to harsh criticisms and unbalanced positions. I say unbalanced because the same opposition these groups profess are rarely voiced or publicized against repressive and dictatorial governments and countries.

My criticism of some of Israel's governmental policies towards the occupation, treatment of minorities and refugees, and the peace process might be similar to theirs. I also know that the Palestinian positions and

behavior are not blameless in much of what occurs. This is not simply a case of an innocent oppressed people who have blameless leadership who are being totally unjustifiably oppressed by an evil empire. As you know the situation is complex, the history is complicated and often ignored or forgotten and there are too many innocent individuals on both sides who are suffering from the violence.

Being a progressive involves supporting many people and groups of people who are threatened and disenfranchised from some parts of our society. This has been true in the arena of equal rights for all no matter their gender, sexual identity, religion, or ethnicity. In the U.S. Jewish progressives have supported many causes and people in the struggles against injustice and oppression. Reform Judaism has stood alongside African-Americans, Muslims, refugees, Dreamers, and members of the LGBTQ community. A few weeks ago I marched in Washington on the 1000 Ministers March for Justice with hundreds of Reform Jews, (including my son Noam and Rabbi Sapowitz). The sponsoring organization NAN, the National Action Network, is headed by the Rev. Al Sharpton, who in the past often had major conflicts with many in the Jewish community. A new or renewed alliance in the struggle for racial justice was now overcoming past difficulties. I say this with the realization that there will be numerous

areas of conflict with some in both the Black community and the Jewish Community that need work.

In regards to supporting the LGBTQ community, Reform Jewish leaders have stood out and spoken up early and often. It is not only here at Temple Sinai that we welcome all who seek to be members with no regard to gender identity. Many synagogues celebrate Pride Shabbat. We participate as proud Jews in Pride parades. Temple Sinai has always been a safe place and we hope to learn more and better understand issues of gender identity so we can be welcoming to all.

Even in Israel with a struggle against the repressive positions of many Orthodox, the acceptance of LGBTQ has made Tel Aviv one of the friendliest and best vacation spots. The Tel Aviv pride parade is large and well received. In Jerusalem there is more resistance because of the predominance of large numbers of Haredim. Yet, enough Israelis support the parade to allow it to occur.

It was terribly sad to see the misguided events, or should I say anti-Semitic events of last summer's Chicago Dyke March. For any who do not know, the parade organizers forbade the carrying of a rainbow flag that had a Jewish Star in the center. Their two claims were that it represented Zionism which in their biased opinion should not be linked to LGBTQ rights.

Their second claim was that such a flag would be provocative and might lead to violence. This position was not unique as too many voices in many marches, including the Women's March in DC at the time of the inauguration posed anti-Zionist positions that were voiced even though many Jewish allies considered themselves to be Zionists.

At the Chicago Dyke March these outrageous claims and ban led to the ejection of a person from the march who brought such a flag, as they had done in the past. This was not an isolated incident.

Earlier in the summer at the Israel Day Parade in NYC a group of BDS anti-Israel protesters disrupted the LGBTQ pro-Israel delegation, claiming they couldn't be both.

There was an interesting op ed in the Forward by Josh Friedes that pointed out the disconnect of intersectionality between many causes as opposed to such causes and Zionism, now viewed as the greatest evil. It said, "What happened at the Dyke March is a powerful example of an increasing phenomenon in progressive spaces. First, Jewish symbols and being Jewish are being conflated with Zionism. Secondly, and equally disturbingly, Zionism is being defined in a very narrow, negative and oppositional way."

Claiming that banning of the Star of David was only anti-Zionist is ludicrous. It is outright anti-Semitism as the star has symbolized Judaism for centuries.

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis made the following statement:

We are outraged by the actions of Chicago 'Dyke March' organizers ... Expelling marchers simply for carrying a rainbow flag bearing the Star of David is unacceptable. The Star of David is a symbol of the Jewish people, and kicking marchers out for carrying a flag that demonstrates the intersectionality of LGBTQ and Jewish identity is anti-Semitic. ...we also know that eradicating anti-Semitism and bigotry in all forms is crucial to our vision of a world of wholeness, compassion and peace.

There are those hoping that Jewish progressive forces will realize that their allies are not among the liberal forces here in the United States and elsewhere. I cannot agree with that point of view. They find more favorable Israel opinions and therefore support for Jews coming from more conservative groups. Often these supportive groups have a social agenda for the U.S. that contradicts most of the beliefs held by the overwhelming majority of Reform Jews. They oppose choice for women, sexual equality, equal marriage, just to name a few issues. Additionally, their support of

Israel is often in line with those who deny any rights to the Palestinians. I find that not to be an acceptable alliance.

I will continue to support the just and righteous causes of equality even if others discount my pro-Israel opinions. I will also continue to try and educate them that my Zionism is also under attack but from the opposite side of the spectrum, the Religious and political right. Just last week I signed another statement "Vision Statement: Israel as a Jewish Democratic State.: It was authored by Rabbi Marc Angel, an Orthodox rabbi, and Rabbi Uri Regev, a Reform rabbi.

That brings us to the developments in Israel regarding conversion and equal access to the Wall.

The conversion issue was put on hold for six months which angered the Haredi parties who sought total control of the issue and walked out angrily from a meeting with Netanyahu. While we are glad the change to give total control to the chief rabbinate is not being made officially yet, it still only affects Orthodox conversions outside of Israel and among non-Haredi Orthodox within Israel. Reform and Conservative conversions, as well as marriages, have never been recognized and that will not change for now. This summer there was also a blacklist of hundreds of rabbis that was circulated in the office of Israel's Chief Rabbinate. The names were not

only of non-Orthodox rabbis but included many Orthodox rabbis who they viewed as being outside the strict Haredi line. My disappointment was not to be included with my colleagues.

This week the so-called chief rabbinate delegitimized other Jews, questioning the validity of their identities which would prevent their marriages.

Another conflict was the demand by the same Haredi parties to renege on the agreement to expand the egalitarian prayer space at the Wall. This was done while the annual meeting of JFNA and the Jewish Agency was taking place in Israel. The united outcry against Netanyahu's political machinations was loud and clear. Anatoly Sharansky the head of the Jewish Agency protested with others. Netanyahu was uninvited to a dinner which seemed unprecedented.

The agreement was to expand the egalitarian prayer space as negotiated for years. The reversal of the agreement is a slap in the face of World Jewry, except for some parts of the Orthodox world. It is also another way of disenfranchising Liberal Jews from their rightful claim as part of the united Jewish people in their homeland. Netanyahu and the government again this week, refused to move ahead with the original agreement.

It leaves us in a quandary. How do we keep supporting Israel, the alleged Jewish homeland, when our brand of observance, our religious ceremonies and our religious leaders are rejected by the government?

I conclude as I began; still with a love and support for Israel, even when that love is tested and a belief in liberal causes to end oppression and foster inclusion, I feel squeezed into a minority but believe this is where I truly belong. I continue to love and support Israel but will fight against many of her policies.

Of course I'd like more allies across the board. The reality of present day politics might not allow that. If you have similar feelings, I encourage you to always examine your positions, make sure they are fair and moral, and stand by them with courage and pride, so you can declare your principles even when they are strained from different directions. As the Talmud teaches, "Eilu v'eilu," both these and these are the words of the Living God.

L'shanah Torah