

The Seat of *Rachamim*

I want to talk today with you about a topic that is difficult, in many ways, a topic that can create tension in families, divide communities, that we often want to avoid because it is so contentious. That topic is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

So. Why do I want to tackle this issue today, on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of our year?

There are at least two reasons. We are here today not just as individuals doing our personal work of *teshuvah*, we are also here as a community, and as part of the larger Jewish community. In the biblical period, as we heard in the Torah reading, the Israelites gathered together on Yom Kippur to seek communal redemption, communal purification. It is a fundamental tenet of our tradition that we as Jews are bound up in responsibility for one another. Today, this extends not just to people in our immediate community, but to the Jewish people as a whole. However distant we may feel from the land and state of Israel, however complicated our sense of connection to the Jewish community may be, as Jews we are ultimately defined not by our beliefs or our practices, but by the simple fact of our belonging to the Jewish people. The crisis in Israel is thus a crisis for all of us, one I feel we all have some responsibility to respond to, to remain engaged with.

The other reason has to do with our own individual spiritual growth. We grow our spirits, our capacity for goodness and Godliness, by wrestling with the difficult issues and challenges that life hands us. We grow spiritually by looking into the face of pain and suffering, not by dodging it. We grow morally by wrestling with that which is ethically complex, by making hard choices, taking uncomfortable positions, by challenging our own assumptions.

On both of these counts, then, I believe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one which demands our attention, for our own sakes as well as for the sake of all of the people who are suffering in that land.

I want to talk with you about this today not to tell you my opinion about what should be done on a political level. What I really want to explore with you is how we think and talk about this conflict. After many years of involvement on this issue, in experiencing how the conflict is discussed both within the American Jewish community and in communities concerned with issues of peace and justice, I am struck by the need to create new categories of discourse. We are, I think, somewhat stuck in our thinking—and in our conversations—because of the paradigms we fall back into when we try to approach this problem. How we frame the issue is critical, because that frame determines to a large extent our emotional reactions, our understanding of what has happened, and our sense of what is possible.

What is this conflict about? What I'd like to suggest is that that question is not as simple as it sounds. There are a variety of ways to conceptualize what exactly this is all about. One way of understanding it is as a conflict between Jews and Arabs, between Israelis and Palestinians. In these terms, it is primarily an existential struggle, a struggle between two peoples, two histories, two narratives. Us versus them.

Framed as an existential struggle, the conflict raises for many Jews existential fears—fears that we will never be accepted as a people among peoples; fears of annihilation. On some level many of us believe that it is impossible for both them and us—defining “us” and “them” as Jews and Palestinians—to be right, to be justified. And even if we in theory can accept that there is room for two peoples on this land, on some deeper level we are experiencing a threat to our very existence—a feeling engendered not only by Palestinian violence, but by worldwide anti-Semitism and a failure of much of the world to understand the nature of the Zionist project. The “us vs. them” struggle that we are engaged in evokes a long history of Jewish existential struggles, literally centuries of Jewish suffering at the hands of those who in some way did not want us to exist. “Us” vs. “them” becomes easily translated into us versus the world.

But this is not the only way to approach the conflict. For many people, some within in the Jewish community and many outside of it, the frame is not primarily that of an existential struggle between two peoples, but a story of victim vs. oppressor, of justice vs. injustice. In this paradigm, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one more example of a global pattern of oppression and resistance to oppression. For example, there is now a movement, largely on college campuses, to cast the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the mold of the conflict between blacks and whites in apartheid South Africa, to see Israel as a kind of colonial power repressing a native population.

I am of course drawing these categories rather broadly. To be within the first paradigm does not mean that one does not have a concern for justice, and to be in the second does not mean one does not feel a sense of identity with the Jewish people. But I do think that our basic frame of reference—and there are others—shapes our thinking. And I have seen these paradigms in conflict, in the conversations that we have. One of the reasons we often seem to talk at cross-purposes is that one person in the conversation may be speaking from a concern over existential issues, while the other is speaking from a paradigm of justice. Often when this happens, one person will end up fearing a threat to their very existence, while the other will be frustrated at the other's seeming disregard for basic human rights. Yet both of these frames of thinking share one quality: a tendency to divide the conflict into right vs. wrong, good vs. evil, victims vs. those who do harm.

My understanding of the conflict is that the reality of it goes far beyond a simple equation of Israeli vs. Palestinian, or of justice vs. injustice. There are in fact many realities, all adding complexity to the mix. There is the reality of competing claims to a land from two peoples who each have historic, mythic, and material connections to it. There is the reality of suffering, the suffering that individuals in both communities have experienced at the hands of the other, as well as each people's history of oppression that predates their conflict with the other. There is the reality of the enormous complexity within both the

Israeli and Palestinian societies, the divide between those committed to a democratic, secular state, and those committed to the rule of God and religious law. Each people includes those willing to compromise and accommodate the other, and those who entertain fantasies of eradicating or removing the other, who dream of a land free of either Jews or Arabs. In each community there are those who truly desire peace and an end of conflict, and those who place other values and goals above peace. Taking all of these realities into account, who can we say is on the side of whom? Who are enemies and who are allies? What is justice, and what is injustice?

On the micro level, on the level of individuals, reality becomes even more complicated. There are Jews married to Arabs. There are Palestinians in the territories trying to teach their children not to hate, and Israeli soldiers trying not to harm innocent people. There are people, perhaps a majority on each side, who simply want the bloodshed and fear and daily struggles to end. There is violence and humiliation, there is prejudice and fear. And there is kindness, there is commitment to reconciliation, there is hope.

When our thinking falls into simple categories of Jew vs. Arab; victim vs. oppressor; innocence vs. terror, we are limited in our ability to see the complexity of what is and to imagine the future for what it might be. We diminish the historical reality of each people and the humanity of individuals. And we do this no matter our politics or our sympathies, whether left or right or somewhere in the middle.

What I'd like to do is to offer another frame, another approach, that perhaps can be helpful in thinking about this issue.

I received an e-mail this summer from a friend, Rabbi Sarra Lev, who has spent a great deal of time in Israel and who is deeply involved in work for peace. She wrote this from Jerusalem:

“Two nights ago I heard a story about a four year old Palestinian boy who was terrified of the soldiers who had invaded his house. One of the international observers [who was in the house] told one of the soldiers to take off his helmet to show the boy that he was just a man, which he did. The mother of the boy took him to give the soldier a kiss, and the soldier kissed him back. The soldiers then proceeded to lock the women and the child in the room, and to ransack the entire house. I spent the night crying.

“The next morning I woke up to the bus bomb in which 19 [Israelis] died and another seventy-something were wounded, some critically. On the news here they give personal life stories of each person. I spent the day crying. Tonight, another bomb went off at a bus stop I used to be at frequently when I was a student at the Hebrew University. Again, I cry. I am beginning to understand why it is that so many people cannot find it in their hearts to see the side of the others. One has to deal with twice as much pain. It's just too exhausting for words.”

Sarra introduces a category into the story that is absent in the other frames of reference. She introduces the experience of *rachamim*, compassion, the pain that a human being feels when she is exposed to the suffering of another. True *rachamim* is an interesting phenomenon. It is universal; it knows no boundaries of nationhood or religion. And at the same time it is highly specific, it arises when we are exposed to the suffering of real people, not abstractions.

In Jewish tradition, *rachamim* is generally understood to be in tension or opposition with another force: that of justice, or *din*. Where *rachamim* is expansive and flowing, *din* is strict and harsh. *Din* is the attribute that insists on the distinction between right and wrong, that demands restitution and retribution when a wrong is committed. *Rachamim* is the source of forgiveness, the ability to let go of the need for punishment, the ability to have mercy on those who have done wrong.

The rabbis of the Talmudic period understood both *Din* and *Rachamim* to be aspects of Godliness. They were written into the very fabric of creation. A midrash, about the creation of the world:

There was a king who had delicate glass cups. He said to himself, “If I pour hot water into them, they will expand and burst; if I pour cold water into them, they will contract and shatter.” So what did he do? He mixed hot water with cold, and poured it into them, and they did not break.

So it was with God. When it came time to create the world, God reflected, “If I create the world with the attribute of *rachamim*, compassion, alone, there will be an overflow of wrongful acts—no one will be afraid of punishment. But if I create the world with *din* alone, how could the world endure? It would shatter from the harsh measure of justice. So I will create it with both justice and compassion, and it will endure.” (Gen. R. 12:15, adapted)

According to this teaching, we need both *din* and *rachamim* in order to achieve a livable world. We need to be held accountable for our actions, and at the same time we need a measure of forgiveness, of compassion for one another, or else the world would be too harsh to live in.

Other midrashim approach the tension between these two qualities in a somewhat different way. They imagine a world in which strict justice is the natural tendency or default position, and yet it must be either tempered or moved aside altogether if the world, and especially humanity, is to exist. Again, from the midrash:

When it came time for God to create the first human, God saw that both wicked and good people would descend from him. This posed a dilemma. God said: “If I create human beings, wicked people will spring from them; but if I do not create them, then how are righteous people going to come into being?”

What did God do? According to Rabbi Berekhiah, God intentionally overlooked the possibility of future evil and joined forces with *middat harachamim*, the Attribute of Compassion, in order to create the first human being.

Rabbi Hanina has a slightly different version of the same story. He teaches that at the moment of creating the first human, God needed to consult with the angels, but realized that if it were revealed to the angels that wicked people might descend from the first person, the Angel or Attribute of Justice would never allow him to be created. So God deliberately hid from the angels the path of the wicked, revealing only the path of the righteous, and the first human came into being. (Gen. R. 8:4)

Each section of this midrash says something similar, from a different direction: the first suggests that God had to give dominance to the Attribute of Compassion in order to create humankind, the second that God had to sideline the Attribute of Justice in order to achieve the same thing.

What does this *midrash* teach? That on some level the desire for justice, for a strict definition of right and wrong, of accountability and punishment, is in tension with our fundamental nature as human beings. We need compassion in order to live. There is a tradition that our task on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is to get God to move from *kisei din*, the Seat of Justice, to *kisei rachamim*, the Seat of Compassion (Lev. R. 29:3-4). We cannot endure if we are held up to the strictest measure of justice, if we are held to account for every wrongdoing. We implore God's mercy, in the traditional imagery, because we know we cannot stand—as individuals, as a community—before the measure of strict justice.

These midrashim purport to be about God, but they are also about us. If it's hard for God to get up out of the seat of judgement and move to the seat of compassion, then how much more so for us mere mortals! But if judgement is our human tendency, compassion is what allows us to live fully in our humanity. While we of course need to know what is right and what is wrong, and to hold one another accountable for wrongdoing, we are cautioned that the path of strict justice is not one that can sustain us—in fact, it might ultimately destroy us.

There is another beautiful midrash that suggests that compassion is something that we practice, ultimately, for our own sake. This midrash relates that, at a time of drought, the people of Israel called on Rabbi Tanchuma to declare a fast and to pray for Godly compassion, in the form of rainfall. The fast proceeded for one day, then two, then three, and no rain fell. The rabbi called on the people to be filled with *rachamim* for one another, and God would in turn show compassion to them. And so they did, and the rains began to fall. (Gen. R. 33:3) A talmudic teaching relates that the person who is able to overlook the wrong done to him, who doesn't stand on his rights for justice, for retribution, will in turn be rewarded with God's compassion for him. (RH 17a)

Last summer, I visited Israel for a little over a week. I spent that time talking to different people inside Israel, getting their sense of what was going on, and I met as well with Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank, hearing and seeing different perspectives there. It was a short visit, and my conversations and impressions were anything but comprehensive or scientific. But I wanted to share some of my musings from that visit with you. After visiting a Palestinian village in the West Bank that had suffered harassment and violence, and a meeting with some Palestinian women in Jerusalem who had lost their homes in 1948, I wrote this:

“Does a refugee have a right to return home? When does one’s state of exile become simply a fact of life, the transition complete—like the experience of most Jews in the world? Is there indeed a “right” of any sort to live in a particular place? In facing the Palestinians, we see the wrenching pain of our own history—Jews uprooted after hundreds of years from England, France, Spain, Russia. And if we nourished a dream, in the abstract, of a return to Jerusalem for 2,000 years, can we begrudge another people the longing for return to their very real homes after only 53 years? And what happens when we are living in those homes?”

What I was struggling with on that visit are the limitations of the demands of justice in such a situation. Do Jews have a “right” to that land? Do Palestinians? Does anyone?

Who defines what is an inalienable “right,” and what happens when similar claims by two groups—like the right to a homeland—come into conflict? Where does justice lie—in bringing to account those who have slaughtered innocent citizens, or in fulfilling the demands of a national longing? To whom does history owe more justice—the Jews or the Palestinians?

I saw a bumper sticker recently that said, “If you want peace, work for justice.” I think I used to believe that. Now I think that in matters of justice and peace, reality can’t be reduced to a bumper sticker. Sometimes demands for justice stand in the way of peace; sometimes we need to move from the seat of justice into the seat of *rachamim* in order to put conflict to rest.

This, then, is the challenge I would like to pose. What would it mean, in thinking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to move ourselves into the seat of *rachamim*? What would it mean to think about it not in terms of rights and wrongs, not in terms of Jew vs. Arab, Israeli vs. Palestinian, but from the perspective of compassion, and the demands that compassion makes upon us? What would it mean to take seriously the suffering of every person, no matter their distance or closeness in terms kinship, political view, religion? To take to heart the suffering of a settler, of the mother of a suicide bomber, of a terrified child?

What does compassion demand from me, as a Jew? As an American? What does compassion demand from the Israelis? From the Palestinians? What would happen if the primary reality that shaped people’s thinking and actions was the felt experience of human suffering? This is not just about each side having

some compassion for the other. It also about having compassion for one's own people, for really letting in the suffering that is happening, and measuring one's actions based on that awareness. My own guess is that revenge and *rachamim* simply cannot sit in the same chair.

It is not at all bad to have loyalty to a people, to a community—it is natural and it helps define who we are. And it's not at all bad to be loyal to an ideal of justice, to work for a world of fairness and equity. But perhaps there is a higher loyalty, something beyond even the ties of peoplehood and the demands of justice—a loyalty to the sacred value of human life, and to the possibility of forgiveness and change. What would it mean to be loyal, above all else, to the power of *rachamim*? Might this be the ground in which the seeds of true peace, of a truly just resolution of the conflict, might be planted?

I don't entirely know what it would really mean to walk a path of *rachamim* in this conflict, but I do believe it's worth thinking more about. Perhaps we need to start with ourselves, to challenge ourselves. For whom in this conflict is it most difficult for me to feel compassion? Can I challenge myself to try to feel compassion for that person, for that group of people? What would I learn if I did that? As Sarra notes, this is not an easy thing to do. To really let in the suffering of people who are different than us, who we feel threaten us, who anger us—this is the hard work of *rachamim*. And to do this doesn't mean that we have to lose sight of our commitments, of our convictions—but it does challenge us to keep our minds and our hearts open. And it also challenges us to make our primary task the true end of all that suffering.

As American Jews, we have before us a related task. We need to work to have compassion for one another, to not dismiss those with whom we disagree as misguided, as self-hating, as unjust, as morally suspect. If nothing else, I hope we can strive in this new year to not sit in the harsh seat of judgement when it comes to talking about Israel.

And let us have a little compassion on ourselves. Do not imagine yourself as marginal, as outside the discussion—whatever discussion it is that you imagine that you're outside of—nor think of yourself as somehow unqualified to speak. To move forward in this holy work of trying to bring peace, in taking seriously our potential role not just as Jews but as citizens of the most powerful nation on the planet, we need to be open. To open our ears, so that we can hear one another. To open our minds, so that we can learn more about what has happened and what might one day be possible. To open our hearts, to be able to take in the suffering that is happening every day. And to open our mouths, to speak from our own experience as part of a conversation that needs to be happening.

There is a story, told by Rabbi Hayyim of Zans, about a man who had been wandering in a forest for several days, not knowing which way was the right way out. Suddenly he saw another man approaching him. “Now I shall certainly find out which is the right way,” he thought. When he got closer, he asked the man, “Brother, tell me which is the right way. I've been wandering in this forest for days.” The other

said, “Brother, I don’t know the way out either. I have also been wandering in this forest for days. But this I can tell you: do not take the way I have been taking, for that will lead you astray. And now let us look for a new way out together.” (in S.Y. Agnon, *Days of Awe*, p. 22)

If there is anything we know about the conflict raging in the Middle East, it is that we have been wandering for many days, and that where we have been gives us no good direction for where we should go next. It is time to look for a new way. I hope that together, as a congregation, as part of the larger Jewish community, we can be a part of this new way. My hope and my prayer is that, like the two men in the forest, we can see one another as partners in this journey, learning from our own experiences of getting lost and helping one another achieve clarity in the days of ahead.