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ASBI Congregation
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They Could Not Speak Peaceably Unto Him

I want to tell you a story about a brilliant idea that I had for a shul program and why I never implemented the program.

I thought it would be a valuable experience for our shul to convene a mock-election prior to the 2019 elections in Israel. With each ballot we could ask for a nominal donation to support Leket Israel, Israel's food bank, or some other tzedakah. We would learn about events in Israel by sharing the party platforms and candidate lists of each of the parties registered for the election. We could share the election campaign videos and the fun jingles that many parties release before each election. And, in this way, not only would we learn about contemporary Israel, we would learn something about ourselves. How would the Knesset look if it was voted into office by the membership of ASBI? What is the range of political identities of our congregation as they might express themselves in a mock election? I joined a Facebook group dedicated to sharing Israeli election videos as I planned to launch this program.

And then, the merger of two small right wing parties, orchestrated by the prime minister, raised the possibility that Itamar BenGvir, leader of Otzma Yehudit, the Jewish Power Party would enter the Knesset with a party platform outside the norms of Israeli democracy and just skirting the limits of what is legal under Israeli law. And, in the aftermath of this development, I was afraid of my own shortcomings as a rabbi and of an inability to talk to people with a position so different from my own if it were to emerge that 50 percent or 10 percent of the membership supported this party and its platform. So I abandoned the idea of a mock election because I was afraid of what I would learn about us.

BenGvir's public life has unfolded in the dark shadows of the extremes of Israeli politics. As a teenager he affiliated with banned Jewish terrorist organizations and the IDF refused to accept him as a soldier for that reason. He first earned notoriety after he assaulted Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's limousine and threatened his life just weeks before his assassination.. He has been investigated by Israeli police dozens of times, indicted for criminal incitement dozens of times, and was convicted of incitement to racism by an Israeli court in 2007. In December 2021 he brandished a handgun and threatened an unarmed security guard who had told him that his car was parked illegally. For decades, the portrait of Dr. Baruch Goldstein, the American born mass-murderer, proudly hung on the living room wall in the Ben Gvir home.

I was not alone in being alarmed at the prospect of such an extreme figure making his way into the Knesset. AIPAC and the AJC condemned him. Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform rabbinic organizations condemned him. And in Jerusalem, Rabbi Benny Lau, who was the rabbi at the last shul where I was a dues paying member, got up in his shul in 2019 and declared that anyone who voted for Ben Gvir and his party was voting for the equivalent of the Nuremberg Laws.

Over five inconclusive Israeli elections Ben Gvir's faction grew in strength and what had been shocking came to be seen as normal. Today, Itamar Ben Gvir is poised to be appointed Minister for Internal Security in the incoming Israeli government and many who denounced him back in 2019 are silent.

My fear of confronting the true diversity of your beliefs was a mistake. Nothing good can come from a refusal to confront the reality of a disagreement. In contrast, the only productive way forward from a disagreement about foundational values is through talking about them. Those who are committed to a vision of Zionism and to a vision of Judaism that is consistent with humanism have failed to convince our brothers and sisters to hope for the things that we hope for and to fear that which we fear. Not only did we not convince others, we did not even try.

At the very beginning of Parashat Vayeshev, the Torah tells us that the first symptom of the brothers' burgeoning hatred for Yosef was their inability to speak to Yosef.

וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף כִּי־אִתּוֹ אֶהָב אָבִיהֶם מִכָּל־אֶחָיו וַיִּשְׂנְאוּ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבְּרוֹ לְשָׁלֹם:

And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him

The Seforno interrogates the phrase דַבְּרוֹ לְשָׁלֹם which seems to saying something beyond not speaking. The Torah doesn't say that the brothers did not speak at all to Yosef. It says that did not speak to him לְשָׁלֹם. What is the added meaning of דַבְּרוֹ לְשָׁלֹם? Seforno says that the brothers did speak to Yosef about the mundane affairs of tending to the family flocks of sheep. But they did not say anything friendly. They did not say anything that pertains to brotherhood.

I think the term דַבְּרוֹ לְשָׁלֹם can mean something more (and it's possible this is what Seforno intended).. It isn't merely peaceful speech (*dabro b'shalom*), or civil discourse, but דַבְּרוֹ לְשָׁלֹם is speech that can lead to peace because it is real and does not shy away from sharing core values and foundational beliefs.

When Yosef shares his dreams of Egyptian agriculture, the brothers only double down on their enmity and alienation from Yosef. There is no possible way for there to be a happy ending to this story so long as the brothers and Yosef are not speaking to one another about the root causes of their disagreements and about the divergent visions for the future of the Children of Israel. Yosef dreams of Egyptian agriculture. He readily assimilates into the highest echelons of Egyptian society and takes on an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife. The brothers dream of preserving their ancestral traditions of shepherding. When they are forced to descend to Egypt they want nothing more than being left alone. The disagreement between Yosef and his brothers is profound and important and is about matters far more weighty than jealousy for a parents' love. But they never discuss it.

If we don't talk about our differences we can never confront them. If we don't talk about our core values and most foundational commitments we can never share them with others or with the next generation.

A few weeks ago I took Akiva to Skokie to hear a shiur delivered by Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein, one of the *rashei yeshiva* at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel. Rav Mosheh talked about Sefer Bereishit and the Torah portion and he spoke about contemporary Israel and its challenges and opportunities and there was a unifying thread of deep religious humanism that connected his reflections on the *parashah* and his reflections on contemporary Israel. And that religious humanism was familiar to me from the writings of Rav Mosheh's father, my teacher Rav Aharon Lichtenstein z'l, and that religious humanism was familiar to me from the

teachings of Rav Mosheh's grandfather, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik z'l. And it was so gratifying to me to see in the room with us, listening to that shiur, were most of the influential rabbis of Chicago Centrist Orthodoxy including heads of schools and rabbis of the largest congregations. All of them seemed to be nodding their heads alongside mine as we heard Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein explain the need for the modern State of Israel to exhibit the same respect for all human life and the very same desire for peace that exemplified the lives of our patriarchs and matriarchs in *Sefer Bereishit*.

And then we got into the car to drive back to Lakeview and Akiva said to me, "it was so interesting to hear him deliver that message because my peers in school say the opposite." It's not enough to nod our heads when we hear our teachers say inspiring and decent words. We need to repeat their words even to audiences that may be less receptive or even hostile to those messages. Certainly we need to understand precisely what members of our community believe about the world and our place in the world before we can hope to influence our community in an enduring way. But like Yosef's brothers, once we sense that there is a difference, we too often hold back and are silent.

I joined a Zoom call with Rav Benny Lau on Monday afternoon with a small group of North American rabbis. He spoke about his fears about the incoming Israeli government and stood behind his harsh criticisms of 2019. But he encouraged us to devote our energies to supporting and advocating for the positions that we believe rather than exhaust ourselves opposing the beliefs that we reject. For most of the past decade, Rav Lau has devoted himself to Project 929, a sort of daf yomi offshoot in which all 929 chapters of Tanakh are read in a coordinated and synchronized way. For most of the past decade Rav Benny Lau, in his capacity as recruiting others to participate in Project 929, has tried to convince secular Israeli public intellectuals and public figures to open a Tanakh and to see how the humanist values of Israeli democracy emerge from the Tanakh itself.

He shared with us the same message as he conveyed to a reporter who quoted him saying:

I don't think it will do any good to shout 'gevalt' and attack people for voting as they did," he says. "Instead, I want to try to affect change from within, through dialogue and persuasion, just like I did with the 929 project. And just as I was able to show secular Israelis that human dignity is a very Jewish value, in fact the basis of the whole Torah, I have to be able to show that to religious Israelis as well.

If we have a commitment to being in community with one another. If we have a commitment to treating one another as sisters and brothers. Then we need a different tactic than Yosef's brothers. Let's listen to one another and let's share with one another. Let's not be afraid to argue over our deepest differences. That's the only way we can eventually have any possibility of building internal peace. And hopefully we can pass on a more authentic and humane Torah to the next generation.