

Rabbi Jeremy S. Morrison
December 17, 2021
Parashat Vayechi

An Open Letter to Zahra Biloo

Dear Zahra Biloo,

Allow me to introduce myself, as we have never met. I am the Senior Rabbi of Congregation Beth Am: the largest synagogue on the Peninsula. We are a community of 1400 hundred families located in Silicon Valley.

I am writing in response to the disturbing, potentially dangerous, and certainly antisemitic speech that you delivered on November 27th in Chicago, at an event hosted by American Muslims for Palestine. Much of what you said about Zionists has been said before. If you were to replace your repeated use of the word "Zionists" with the word "Jews" your remarks reveal the dog whistle that you employed in a poor attempt to obscure classic antisemitic conspiracy theories. In this way your speech, comprising well-worn antisemitic tropes, was nothing new.

However, there was one "creative" component in your rhetoric of hate. In a twisted sense, I might call it an innovation. To my knowledge, you *potentially* added a new phrase to the insidious lexicon of antisemitism when you warned your audience about, quote, "Polite Zionists." As you declared,

"When we talk about Islamophobia, we think often times about the vehement fascists." By this statement I think you meant extreme, right-wing Zionists.

You then continued,

"I also want us to pay attention to the polite Zionists. the Anti-Defamation League, Jewish Federations, Hillel and Zionist synagogues. The ones that say, 'Let's just break bread together.' They are not your friends."

Disgusted as I was by your words, this phrase, "polite Zionists," which was new to my ears, made me realize that, well, *I* am a polite Zionist.

Before I learned of your speech, I had not really thought of myself in those terms. And my understanding of what exactly a polite Zionist is, is *certainly* very different from your own. But if the shoe fits...

I am a polite Zionist.
I don't generally shout about my commitment to and love of Israel.
I never tweet.

I distrust slogans.

I value *civil* discourse and debate, not only about Zionism, but about most topics.

I care about nuance and worry when complex issues are viewed as binary.

When public speakers, in front of large crowds, invoke the language of “us” and “them” I get nervous.

I spend considerable time crafting sermons about Zionism.

I teach in synagogue settings about Israel and, as I imagine you would not infer, I also teach about the Palestinian Authority and about the difficult conditions for many Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank.

I do all of these things.

And,

from time to time,

like many polite Zionists do,

I write letters.

But I’ve never written a letter like this one: a letter addressed to a member of the Muslim community regarding my reception of her speech; explaining to her—to you, Zahra—my polite Zionism.

Please allow me to explain why this letter is an anomaly:

As a leader of an American Jewish community, I do not believe it is my role to tell Palestinians what they should do in response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I hope that Palestinian and Muslim leaders will teach facts about Israel, and facts about Jewish history and the Holocaust; and that Palestinians will strive for peace with their Israeli neighbors. I imagine, which is to say, I hope that in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as here in America, there are Muslims and Palestinians who are equivalently concerned as I am, about nuance, complexity, and peace. Despite these hopes, I have never addressed public comments to Palestinians, or written a letter to a Muslim leader, because I have no real influence over Palestinian communities and Palestinian actions.

Instead, I focus my energies and time within the Jewish community that I lead: a community of, by and large, polite Zionists.

In my community we, together, develop a life-long love, engagement, and commitment to Israel. A commitment that celebrates the evolution of a remarkable country. Often, I will remind my congregants that as we thrive in *this* exceptional, unparalleled homeland for Jews, that America, after 245 years, is still an “Imperfect Union.” Comparatively, as I see it, Israel at 73 years young is in its early adolescence. It continues to figure out how to be both a Jewish and democratic country. As a modern nation-state, this is Israel’s unique feature and struggle. Despite the odds that seem increasingly stacked against it, I, like most polite Zionists, still consider a negotiated, two-state solution as the only feasible resolution to this challenge.

We polite Zionists love Israel. An important, I would even say, sacred obligation of our—or of at least my—love of Israel, is to insist that the Israeli Government in its domestic and foreign policy strives to uphold the highest of Jewish and democratic values and, when it fails to do so, I have the responsibility to criticize it. For me, and for many but not all of my fellow polite Zionists, our relationship to the State of Israel bears many similarities to the patriotism that I practice here in America: a country that I love led by a government that I will criticize when its actions at home and abroad do not live up to our democratic ideals.

I was reminded of these ideals and of my patriotism as I watched your speech.

The First Amendment protected your right to stand in a conference hall in the beautiful city of Chicago and spew hate about Jews. Yet I uphold *your* right to speak so grotesquely about me, as I too benefit from the protections of the First Amendment. But generally, polite Zionists do not view the world and consider solutions to its problems solely through the lens of self-interest; or rather, many polite Zionists recognize that our security as Jews in America, and in Israel, is inextricably linked to the safety of all peoples. We believe it is dependent on us to build alliances with other minorities in this country in order to create a society free from antisemitism, racism, and, I will add, Islamophobia. I would hope that in your role as the Executive Director of the SF office of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, an organization that seeks to protect civil rights and to promote justice, that you would understand our common interests.

However, to your audience in Chicago, you asserted that most mainstream Jewish organizations and synagogues “are your enemies” who will stab you in the back at the first opportunity; you called the idea of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “laughable.” What’s more: your divisive language was not only aimed at Jews, as you also attacked Muslim institutions who work with organizations supporting Israel as being “in some ways worse than the Zionists.”

As I listened to your screed, a stream of what is often called “unprintable language” came to my mind. In this letter, I will politely say that your comments struck me as counterproductive. Not only to the relationship between Muslims and Jews in America, but also deleterious to the national aspirations of Palestinians.

Here’s how:

During this period here in America and abroad, when strident voices on the left and on the right, both within and beyond the Jewish community are pulling us apart, we, polite Zionists, are working diligently to hold the center.

And please do not mistake our politesse for lock-step agreement. We have our disagreements and debates. For evidence, simply look at the often acrimonious relationship between supporters of J-Street and AIPAC: two organizations that during this time of extreme polarization increasingly define the center of Jewish, communal Zionism. Although these

organizations are publicly at odds with each other, they do share a commitment to a negotiated settlement between Palestinians and Israelis.

We are holding the center.

Unlike vehement, right-wing Zionists, our polite Zionism is predicated upon our Jewish moral sensibilities *and* our commitment to human dignity and human rights. Unlike vocal anti-Zionists and supporters of the BDS movement, we understand the nuances of American foreign policy: how the United States government's commitment to a strategic alliance with the democratic and Jewish State of Israel, works to secure the liberties and constitutional rights that we benefit from as religious minorities living in America.

And what you might label a "Zionist Conspiracy," I consider a political reality. As centrists and institutionalists, we, polite Zionists, have power and influence. Furthermore, many of us polite Zionists are invested in the national aspirations of Palestinians, but not at the cost of Israel's security and its Jewish identity. In other words, an alliance with us, with polite Zionists who are capable of envisioning two peoples living at peace with each other, is in your self-interest as an American Muslim dedicated to the human rights of Palestinians.

Zahra, I know that you likely disagree with much of what I have written in this letter. I would be happy to meet with you to discuss our differences. For me, disagreements are an opening for dialogue and for learning.

But here is one thing that I know we agree upon: each of us is an adherent of profound, magnificent traditions wherein we turn to sacred texts for wisdom and guidance.

This week, in synagogues around the world, we are concluding our reading of the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis. I know that you are familiar with this story as it is a prominent narrative in the Quran and Joseph is a revered prophet within Islam. Jewish tradition considers Joseph's father Jacob, who dies in this week's Torah portion and who was blind in his old age, as a sage capable of seeing far beyond present realities. Rabbinic interpretation ascribes to Jacob the ability to perceive the good in the bad, to uncover the promise lying latent in crisis. As you might recall from the story of Joseph told in the book of Genesis, when Jacob's family is suffering from a famine in Canaan, he sends his sons to Egypt for rations. As the Torah states, "Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt" (Gen. 42:1). In this verse, the Hebrew word for rations or grain is *shever*; but this word, *shever*, can also mean "broken" or "shattered." If you change slightly one letter of the root of this Hebrew word, you arrive at the word *sever* which, in the Hebrew Bible, can mean "hope."

"Jacob saw that there was grain—*shever*—in Egypt. A rabbinic interpretation of this verse describes Jacob as seeing so much more than the fact that there was grain to be had in Egypt: Jacob sees hope, *sever*, in the midst of brokenness. As this *midrash* reads:

Jacob saw that there was *shever*—brokenness—which was the famine in Canaan.

But there was *sever*—hope—that is, the plenty, the grain to be had in Egypt.
There was *shever*—brokenness— when Joseph was taken down to Egypt;
But there was *sever*—hope—for Joseph would become a ruler that would save a nation.
There was *shever*—brokenness—for the Israelites would become enslaved in Egypt.
But even then, Jacob maintained hope—*sever*—for in the end, Jacob saw that the Israelites would go free.¹

What Jacob sees, according to this midrash, is a necessary relation between disaster and hope. Jacob sees that when things fall apart when there is *shever*, the opportunity for *sever*, for hope arises.²

Zahra, we are living together in the Bay Area at a time of great brokenness in our country and during a period of shattered relationships between two peoples: Israelis and Palestinians. Can you not see that there is a famine in our land? That we are starving from our denial of each other's humanity? That we are all starving for empathy?

In this period of profound *shever*, I address this letter to you motivated solely by *sever*, by hope:

for dialogue,
for mutual understanding,
and, above all,
I address this letter to you with the hope for peace.

Sincerely (after all, I am nothing if not polite),

Rabbi Jeremy S. Morrison

¹ *Bereishit Rabbah* 91:1.

² See Aviva Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (NY: Doubleday, 1995), 302.