

Rabbi Jeremy S. Morrison
February 12, 2021
Parashat Mishpatim

The Bible often presents a polarized worldview constructed from opposing elements, strict categories of belief and action.

There is to be no gray zone.
No ambivalence, no confusion, no doubt.

Din Rachamim.
Justice mercy.
Loyalty treachery.
Pure impure.
Fear desire.

Uncomfortable with the blurry, the indeterminate, seeking to eradicate the liminal, biblical writers define the polarities of faith.

In or out, these texts declare.
With us or against us.
All or nothing.
Good or evil.

The revelation at Sinai, of which we are reading these weeks in the Torah, epitomizes this perspective. In a series of scenes in which figures ascend or descend, where holiness happens on high, and apostasy down low, legalities are clarified, made sacrosanct. Boundaries are set; the terms of the covenant fixed for eternity. Last week in *parashat yitro* the Ten Commandments were proffered. This week, in *parashat mishpatim*, they are accepted. But first, the terms of covenant are read to the Israelites and, famously, the people respond, *Na'aseh v'nishmah*: they commit to the covenant and to God and then, and only then, the two parties to this eternal covenant *really* start to get to know each other. That process of “relationship building” occupies the remaining narratives of the Torah.

The essence of a covenant is commitment.
Commitment involves risk and entails the limiting of choices. When you covenant with another you are saying “no” as much as you are saying “yes.”
I said those words right here in this sanctuary, a little over a year ago, on Superbowl Sunday, during the only large-scale, in-person Beth Am gathering of which I have taken part. Although we did not re-enact Sinai in those moments together when you ratified a contract with me, your new Senior Rabbi, our actions on that day shared elements of covenant-making. And ever since, we’ve been learning about one another, getting to know each other, building trust with one another.

Through this process of getting to know each other, one thing I have learned about you, is that sometimes when a new rabbi arrives in a community, particularly during a pandemic, the experience can be, at least for some congregants, polarizing. What I do, or don't do, provokes anxiety, even anger; what I say and even what I don't say—or haven't yet said—raises concerns.

For instance:

I've been asked by a number of members of the congregation why haven't I spoken out more frequently against antisemitism during these first months of my tenure? Others have expressed anxiety and dismay, that the prioritization of our racial equity and justice work comes at the cost of fighting antisemitism and, relatedly, of opposing the BDS movement. Sometimes, as is the age-old *minhag*, custom, of congregants everywhere, these anxieties are expressed in angry or indignant letters addressed to the Senior Rabbi: the writers also, usually, cc the Board of Trustees, a custom adhered to with greater ease in the age of the Internet and of email. But there have also been concerned congregants who, individually, have approached me from a place of inquiry; who begin our interactions with questions and not condemnation; and with whom I have developed a dialogue about these matters. These congregants, and you know who you are, recommended that I share with you what I told them when *they* asked these questions, since they found my answers useful. I hope this information is helpful to you too.

It is true that since the beginning of my tenure, I have not spoken frequently about antisemitism. Although I believe consciousness raising is important, like many of you, I prioritize action over speech. And during the past 7 months, I, and more importantly, *we* have taken actions to counter antisemitism locally and in our state.

Many of us have been engaged in the efforts to determine the curriculum guidelines and content of California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum and have lobbied for the elimination of anti-Jewish, and anti-Israel content, and for the inclusion in the curriculum of Jewish narratives and of a definition of antisemitism. On this evening, I want to acknowledge, particularly, the dedicated work of Maddy and Jeff Carmel, Joanne Donsky, Barb Windham, and other members of our JIAC Committee, the work of Lauren Janov, the guidance of Amy Gerstein, and the leadership of several Beth Am congregants who are Board members of the JCRC. I, too, have been part of this ongoing advocacy. Although there are differences among us as to tactics and goals, we are all cautiously optimistic that the improvements from earlier versions of the curriculum will be ratified in March. And we will remain vigilant as the ESMC is implemented in every school district in California.

A less visible effort, but potentially, one of much greater impact than any number of speeches or presentations is an improvement to our education program. I'm pleased to share with you, that for the first time at Beth Am, we have incorporated Facing History and Ourselves' Holocaust and Human behavior curriculum into our religious school's offerings for our seventh graders. Through readings, primary source material, and short documentary films, this semester long course explores the complex history of the Holocaust and prompts reflection on our world today. Facing History and Ourselves is a remarkable organization that uses lessons of history to challenge teachers and their students to stand up to bigotry and hate. This effective curriculum,

with which I am very familiar from my work at Temple Israel in Boston, is the gold-standard in holocaust education for adolescents and teens.

I am proud of our collective efforts to combat antisemitism through education. But congruent with these initiatives is our strategic prioritization of our racial equity and justice efforts. And of these, I have been publicly speaking and teaching. This multi-faceted work, which is not new at Beth Am, but to which we are re-dedicating ourselves in new ways, will be an ongoing and long-term initiative. But we Jews have never shied away from complex, sometimes messy, generational change projects.

There are many reasons why our pursuit of racial equity and justice is interwoven with our struggle to uproot antisemitism and, admittedly, this can be hard to understand and difficult to articulate. But here's a summary:

If we recognize that our security as Jews in America is inextricably linked to the safety of all peoples, then 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 other forms of bigotry.

This reasoning has become ever more trenchant during the past 30 years: a period in which White Nationalism has made its way from the margins of American political life to its center, a fact never more visible to us than on January 6th.

To white nationalists, Jews are a separate, and evil race; a powerful and often unseen force responsible for white dispossession. Erik Ward, the Executive Director of Western States Center, an organization that works nationwide to strengthen inclusive democracy, writes, "Antisemitism forms the theoretical core of White nationalism...It is the fuel that White nationalist ideology uses to power its anti-Black racism..."¹

Ward, who is Black, has investigated white supremacy and its descendent, American White Nationalism, throughout his career. His work has led him to this conclusion, "I discovered that Antisemitism... is a particular and potent form of racism so central to White supremacy that Black people would not win our freedom without tearing it down."

Ward's statement compels our attention. Here is a Black leader saying that *antisemitism* is a pernicious obstacle to *his* sense of freedom, *his* ability to live in peace in America.

I would suggest this corollary to Ward's conclusion: the obstacle to our ability to live in peace as Jews in this county is structural racism.

Perhaps it is easier to understand how our pursuit of racial equity and justice intertwines with our fight against antisemitism if this reasoning is expressed like a solution to a logic problem or a mathematical equation that goes like this:

White supremacy is the polar opposite of anti-Racism. Anti-Racists stand in opposition to white supremacists. Since antisemitism fuels white supremacy, if we partner with our BIPOC allies to

¹ See <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism>.

dismantle a caste system premised on skin color, a caste system in which we are all enmeshed, then our efforts will go a very long way towards eradicating antisemitism.

Put simply, reductively: anti-Racism work is good for the Jews.

I consider sermons a pedagogic opportunity: a way to educate, to influence thought, to refocus our community. Preaching is a mode of communication that enables us all to more clearly view our lives through the lens of Jewish texts and traditions. Sermons may comfort and challenge; they answer questions and pose them. From time to time—which is to say, *very rarely*—*divrei torah* and sermons may provoke changes in individual actions; but generally, sermons aren't a powerful tool to alter behaviors. More frequently, good sermonizing will, for a brief moment, clarify our collective aspirations, and inspire our pursuit of them. And if I consider the *divrei torah* and sermons that I have given during the past twenty-years, I perceive, as a thematic through-line, a focus on individual autonomy and collective power: our power to change ourselves and how, together, we can impact our world.

In this sermon, I set out to answer two questions that have been repeatedly asked of me. I hope that what I've said tonight allays concerns that our racial equity and justice work comes at the cost of combatting antisemitism.

As for the other question: actions speak louder than words. But there is one more reason why I infrequently speak about antisemitism from the pulpit. It is simply because you are not anti-Semites. We are not anti-Semites. And one thing *we* don't need to work on, or change about ourselves, is our antisemitism. Anti-Semites need to work on eradicating *their* antisemitism: they should change that about themselves.

I don't speak to, teach, pastor, lead, a community of anti-Semites. No. I teach, and lead, and speak to you: a large, and diverse community of Jews and non-Jewish partners and allies. And although I'd like the religious leaders of anti-Semites and white supremacists to teach what I teach; they don't and they will not.

What they teach is a polarizing worldview. They preach a conception of justice that is a zero-sum game of either/or:

With us or against us.
Pure or impure.
European or non-European.
Non-Jew or Jew.
White or Black.

A little over a year ago, the one time that I stood with you in this space, I spoke of how covenant making is an auditory and visual experience. Whether at Sinai, or under the *chuppah*, or right here in this sanctuary, the two parties who are about to forge a covenant must hear and see one another. And what I saw then, Beth Am, a year ago, I see even more clearly now:

I see a community that expects excellence and welcomes challenge, that values nuance and does not sidestep complexity. And what I see too, is that our pursuit of Justice is not zero-sum. It's not either/or; it is both/and.

We are a community willing to grapple with both/and:

We need to contend with antisemitism *and* we have access to high quality healthcare, education, and jobs.

We are threatened by antisemitism *and* when needed, we can count on fair treatment from our justice system.

There is antisemitism in America *and* most of us, not all, but most of us do not fear gun violence and the police when we leave our homes.

We are living in a period of rising antisemitism *and* we, collectively, have access to, and wield, financial and juridical power. When we are threatened, fearful, worried, attacked, we know who to call; we have allies who will stand shoulder to shoulder with us when we confront hatred and bigotry.

We have the security of privilege. Whether we earned it through hard work or have been granted it solely because of the color of our skin, most of us benefit from privilege: a word which might simply be best understood as a synonym for power.

This is a sermon that began with two of your questions, and I'm about to conclude it by posing one of my own. Questions, all of these questions: it's how you know this is a Jewish sermon.

If you have any concerns or questions about what I've said this evening, I want to encourage you to simply reach out to set up a time to meet with me to talk. I promise that if you repurpose the amount of time needed to write an angry email into a 45-minute conversation with me, you'll be much happier with the outcome. A hope, a fervent hope, that I have for Beth Am is that we, together, can break the chains of the age-old, Jewish custom of writing angry letters to the Senior Rabbi.

There. See what I just did?

I spoke an aspiration that I have for our community.

But I know, and as I said, sermons are not the best tool to alter behaviors.

Here's my question:

How should we, Beth Am, wield our power to address the ever-increasing, socio-economic polarization in America?

Shabbat Shalom.