

After Colleyville, We Rebuild Our Home

Parashat Yitro, 5782

It may seem silly, but in my adult life, the thing that gives me the most anxiety, each and every day, is having to get my children to complete a task together when time is a factor. Thinking about small, daily tasks, like getting shoes on and heading out the door, or larger ones like eating dinner in less than an hour while everyone's tushies remain in a chair already make me start to sweat, make me clench my jaw just a bit, even talking about them right now. It's not the chaos, though I'll admit that running, screaming children do not invite a calm or relaxing state of mind; for me it's the fear that silliness will turn into squabbles which inevitably lead to teasing, fighting, hitting, and ultimately full-on, broken-hearted bawling. The sight of my children hurt, especially when they hurt one another, breaks my heart to the point that I actually get angry, that I want to scream at them, "What are you thinking?! You know better!" and, in the same breath, hold them and comfort them.

Which was why it was somewhat notable last weekend, a long, cold weekend full of lots and lots and lots of inside time, time altogether, time without distractions or friends or, in the case of Shabbat, screens, that my boys actually held up ok. So much so that I remember gathering for havdalah together on Saturday night, and looking at Jes and Amitai and

Nadav and actually pausing to appreciate the blessing of a calm Shabbat where brothers just played nicely together. A Shabbat without violence.

But of course it wasn't. Last Shabbat, Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, TX was overtaken by violence motivated by one of the oldest and vilest forms of hate: the antisemitism born of false conspiracy theories of a shadowy Jewish elite controlling world events. In this case, the man who threatened violence against this Jewish community and took four people hostage for eleven hours thought that if he could harm or threaten some vulnerable Jewish Americans, these mysterious higher ups would get the message and release a convicted terrorist, who was so filled with anti-semitic hate she refused to have Jewish lawyers represent her and asked DNA tests to exclude anyone of Jewish origin from her jury trial back in 2010.

Like many of you, I watched for any news or change as the hostage crisis unfolded into Saturday night. I clung onto my wife when newscasters reported they had heard a loud bang and what sounded like gunshots. I felt the minutes stretch until it was finally confirmed that the hostages were all safe and free and miraculously unharmed. And I felt relief and joy and gratitude for that moment.

And as I started to breathe normally and calm down, I held my wife close, and she said, “I fear THIS every week. Sometimes, you’ll be at shul and I’ll hear a siren and my heart will stop and I think, ‘Is this it? Is this the day something happened at shul?’” And my heart broke all over again.

In the past few days, I have seen colleagues around the world put out calls for people to come to shul this Shabbat. Show up! Defy those who hate us. Be brave and join our Jewish community in celebrating life and creating holy space and time to show the world we are not afraid. As the brilliant scholar of anti-semitism, Deborah Lipstadt, wrote in the New York Times this past Tuesday, “It is not radical to say that going to services, whether to converse with God or with the neighbors you see only once a week, should not be an act of courage. And yet this weekend we were once again reminded that it can be precisely that.”

She is right on both accounts. It is an act of courage to gather together knowing that there are hateful attacks against Jewish people in our sacred spaces. It should not be this way.

But how should it be? That’s a question I have asked myself all week long. What is the experience of coming into synagogue supposed to be, to do, to make us feel? I believe that we find a compelling picture in Parashat Yitro, which we read only moments ago.

The first verses of the Torah portion recount Moses meeting his father-in-law, Yitro, greeting him, joyously recounting for him the miraculous escape from Egypt and the wonders God had performed. And after some time to talk together, Moses has to return to work. Yitro watches him at his work, sees the Jewish people line up before him to ask questions of Moses, and he yells at Moses saying,

מִה־הַדִּבֶּר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה לָעָם מִדּוּעַ אַתָּה יּוֹשֵׁב לְבַדְּךָ וְכָל־הָעָם נֹצֵב עָלֶיךָ מִן־

בֹּקֶר עַד־עֶרֶב:

“What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?” [Exodus 18:14]

Many commentators ask, “What is Moses doing that is so bad?” His answer seems to justify his work: The people want him, and him alone, because his work is לְדַרְשׁ אֱלֹהִים, literally to “explain [the works] of God.” Who else could do it?

But according to the rabbis of our tradition, Moses is missing the fundamental problem. Yes, taking all of the burden on himself will tire him out, but what is more important than that is that while he is hard at work, the Israelite People are spending their days standing in a line waiting for answers and guidance. Says Chizkuni, the 13th Century French

commentator, “While Moses wearied himself, the people grew impatient, anxious, and scared.”

This was their first foray into independence, and instead of coming together to build one another up, they are relearning the slave mentality of servitude, of negating themselves for the sake of an overlord, of waiting to be led instead of stepping into the world.

Which is why it is so significant that Moses DOES decide to appoint junior judges, so that the people not only see other leaders beside him, but see the limitless potential for each of them to lead. It’s why the people coming together with one voice to proclaim their peoplehood in the first days as a community of free people is so critical, saying

וַיַּעֲנוּ כָּל-הָעָם יְחָדָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְיָ נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע מִשְׁכּוֹל מֹשֶׁה אֶת-דִּבְרֵי הָעָם אֵל-יְיָ

“All that the LORD has spoken we will do!” And Moses brought back the people’s words to the LORD. [Exodus 19:8]

It’s why it is so critical that not just chieftains, not just prophets or priests or tribal heads, but every man, woman, and child, every Jew and stranger, literally ALL THE PEOPLE who were in the camp heard God’s message at Sinai, as God descended onto the mountain and presented the people with Torah

וְכָל־הָעָם רָאוּ אֶת־הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת־הַלַּפִּידִם וְאֶת קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר

And ALL the people saw the thunder and lightning, the blast of the shofar

[Exodus 20:15].

Moses could have continued to shelter the entire people, could have led them by himself and shielded them for the next forty years from the difficulties of life by letting them rely on him as God's servant and chosen leader. But he didn't. Instead he brought people together to create one of the most sacred encounters in our history.

But it is worth noting that the Sinai moment wasn't just bliss. It was terrifying. Even as they witnessed this profound moment, in the same breath as we are told that the people saw these miraculous things together, we hear וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיָּנֻעוּ וַיַּעַמְדוּ מֵרֶחֶק: "And when the entire people saw all this, they fell back and stood at a distance." [Exodus 20:15]. Similarly, the only reason that Yitro needs to come and find Moses is because he sent his family away from the dangers he was going to face by confronting Pharaoh. We like to think of the Exodus narrative as the story of a people redeemed and a tyrant punished, but at the time, in the moment, even Moshe, a person who had spoken to God, who had heard a promise of redemption directly from the Creator of the Universe, still had fear that in

doing his sacred duty, in joining with and leading his people, he and his family might not be safe, or might not make it through that ordeal at all.

We cannot disentangle our desire for safe sacred spaces from our need to be together with other people. As Rabbi Arnow has wisely, but jokingly, told me many times this past year, the safest way to have a shul is to permanently lock the doors and never let anyone in. Whether we are fighting tornados, COVID, or violent hate, it can be tempting to think that if we only hunker down, keep the burdens to ourselves, and lock the doors, we will be safe.

In some ways, there is truth in this. We are constantly reviewing and updating our own security measures, including our safety protocols, trainings, and technologies. We reach out to local and national security experts to make sure we, especially our staff and leaders, are as prepared as we can be. We have worked tirelessly to build real, healthy relationships with our local law enforcement who, by the way, immediately messaged our staff and lay leadership last Saturday to let us know that we were on their minds in the wake of the hostage crisis and to ask if there was anything they could do to ensure our safety. As soon as we were aware of the situation at Beth Israel, our leadership was already thinking about steps to

ensure the safety of every person who might come into this building or into one of our programs.

All of those steps are important. The safety of this building and the community who have made it possible are of paramount importance. Full stop.

And also, we are a community and a people who have committed ourselves to the idea of radical welcoming, of the idea that everyone deserves to be treated with respect, kindness, compassion, and care. We read in the Book of Isaiah:

וְהֵבִיאֹתִים אֶל־הַר קְדֻשִׁי וְשִׁמְחֹתִים בְּבֵית תַּפְלִתִּי עֹלֹתֵיהֶם וְזִבְחֵיהֶם לְרָצוֹן עַל־מִזְבְּחִי כִּי
בֵּיתִי בֵּית־תַּפְלָה יִקְרָא לְכָל־הָעַמִּים:

*I will bring them to My sacred mount and let them rejoice in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be welcome on My altar;
For My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*

[Isaiah 56:8]

This is what I have been struggling with all week. I was heartbroken to listen to Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, Congregation Beth Israel's rabbi, explain how he looked out last week as he was preparing for Shabbat, saw a man clearly in need, offered him a cup of tea, and how that decision brought danger to himself and his community.

It's a horrible thought, that our kindness could be repaid with hate and violence. And yet I am not ready to give up being kind. I am weary, like Moshe, like the Israelites standing in line hour after hour, I am exhausted and spent just trying to keep track of the evils in the world, let alone do something to fight against them. It would be so very easy to shut down my heart, to close myself off, to say goodbye and good luck, to be done with the hurts that others might inflict upon me.

And then, I heard the words of my brilliant teacher, Rabbi Gordon Tucker, who, in a session this week quoted an incredible piece commentary by Rachel Rabinovitz to the Haggadah, saying "Jewish existence is a tapestry woven of silk on a loom of steel, woven with tears and blood, mystery and martyrdom, threnody, exultation, anguish, ecstasy, peril, and paradox. We will never forfeit that most desirable of designations, merciful children of the merciful God, *rachmanim b'nei rachmanim*."

I refuse to turn off my compassion because I cannot do so and continue to do the work of a rabbi, nor live the life of a Jew. To do so is to shirk life, to avoid responsibility, to cast off the sacred path that undergirds every moment of Jewish existence. We are commanded, again and again, not to hold hate, but to heal hearts, not to hide but to hearken, not to look inwardly, but rather to act outwardly. And if I only look at this world through

the lens of fear, if I continue to back away without appreciating the sacred moments I am blessed to receive, or the sacred souls with whom I stand, then I am missing the entire point of being created in God's own image.

When this Shabbat ends, I will stand once again with my wife and my children for havdalah. Together, we will sing alongside Jews around the world as they have to end Shabbat for millennia: לַיהוּדִים הָיְתָה אֹרֶחַ וְשִׂמְחָה וְשִׂשְׁוֹן וְיָקָר; "The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor," words from Megilat Esther (8:16) describing the scene in which Jewish people were exulting at the precise moments that others had set for their deaths, plans which were now undone.

So I will rejoice with my family, not only because we are still here, not only because we are physically unharmed, but because, in spite of everything, we choose to keep our ability to celebrate, our capacity to still remain joyful and grateful, caring and kind, open and open-minded. We will choose to rejoice because at the end of the day, I cannot change how everyone in the world thinks or feels, believes or acts, but I can choose not to let the hateful acts of a few change who I am.

I may hold them a little closer, I may linger in the comfort of their arms a few moments longer than I normally would, I may even feel a piece of my heart crack as I imagine all of the frightening hurts potentially waiting for

them out there in the world. But even still, I will savor the joy of their love and company.

לִיהוּדִים הֵיטֵה אֹרֶה וְשִׂמְחָה וְשֵׁשׁ וִיקָר

May the Jewish People, and all people everywhere, continue to gather in happiness and honor, and to be for one another the greatest source of light and joy.

Shabbat Shalom.