

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
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Parashat Mishpatim

When I heard the news late Monday night about the matzevot—gravestones—that were toppled at Chesed Shel Emeth Cemetery, even though I was in New York at the time, I felt a little like “they were coming to get us.” On the heels of bomb threats to ten more JCC’s around the country Monday, it felt like an attack, and a part of me felt scared for whatever might come next. And scared by whoever did this.

Almost all of us have been to burials at Chesed Shel Emeth—and so many of us have loved ones who are at rest there. I saw Jordan Kodner, Gail Brody and Rick Kodner’s son, who’s a student at Mizzou, who came in the for the day. He said he has forty-nine relatives buried there.

The desecration of this cemetery, so close to Kol Rinah, such an important part of our community, such an important place for so many of us—this was offensive, and personal.

This was Monday night. And yet. By Wednesday afternoon, not even forty-eight hours later, I did something I never thought I’d do at a cemetery. I got more than a thousand people to cheer for themselves.

That had not been my plan. I got up there, introduced myself as Rabbi Noah Arnow from Kol Rinah, a synagogue just a few blocks down the street from the cemetery. Kol Rinah, you should know, got a few cheers, the first cheers I remember hearing that day. I said to the crowd something like, “don’t cheer for Kol Rinah—let’s cheer for everyone here.” And to me, standing in the bed of a pickup truck, it sounded like a roar, a cathartic, roar of joy.

Let me say something about the joy I heard at that moment, the joy I felt at that moment. It was “the joy that follows rightly confronted despair,” in the words of existential psychologist Rollo May. As May puts it, “Joy is the experience of possibility, the consciousness of one’s freedom as one confronts one’s destiny. In this sense despair, when it is directly faced, can lead to joy.”¹

The joy was not because there were so many different Jews there, which there were. The joy was not because the cemetery was cleaned up, and most of the matzevot, gravestones, had been reset. The joy wasn’t because of the beautiful day, although it was beautiful.

It was because the fear, the isolation, the loneliness and vulnerability that I, and I think, we, had felt Monday night and Tuesday, had been not replaced, but subsumed, by feelings of being supported, cared about, heard, acknowledged. Having our elected officials there, whatever you might think of any of them individually, from Vice President Pence, to Governor Greitens, who was there for about two hours, to Congressman Lacy Clay, to University City Mayor Shelly Welsch, said to me that others care about us, and our community.

The outpouring of support from virtually every Christian denomination represented on the Interfaith Partnership, whose cabinet I sit on (as of last month) as the representative of the St. Louis Rabbinical Association, and from so many members of the University City Ministerial

¹ Rollo May, *Freedom and Destiny*. Quoted in *Almanac for the Soul: Anthology of Hope*, by Marv and Nancy Hiles (Healdsburg, CA: Iona Center, 2008), pp. 52-53.

Alliance. And especially, the full-throated support from the local Muslim community, and national Muslim groups, who have raised more than \$116,000 for the cemetery.

The trajectory here, *me'afela l'ora*—from darkness to great light, from despair to joy, is almost unexpected, and, by definition difficult and painful, and yet not especially uncommon.

We have a kind of parallel trajectory in this week's parasha. Mishpatim is loaded with mitzvot, commandments, most of them in the first two chapters dealing with civil law. Laws of Hebrew slaves, of damages and punishments for crimes and tragic accidents, torts regarding damaged property. But every scenario is an unfortunate one—whether the victim is a person's life, a person's eye, an animal, or valuable goods. And then are a series of commandments about moral behavior—almost uniformly phrased in the negative—don't do oppress the stranger, don't eat flesh torn by dogs, don't carry false rumors.

It's really unpleasant stuff, and you know they only prohibited it because people were doing it, or had, or might.

But from here, the parasha goes through a few more mitzvot, and then, God calls Moses, Aaron, Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu, and the seventy elders, to come up the mountain. They all go up, and *vayiru et elokei yisrael*—they saw the God of Israel. This is the most intense theophany of the entire Torah, the most intense, direct revelation or experience of God in the Torah. No hiding behind a rock, or anything like that.

And they were so happy, or worn out, they ate and drank, while up there! Maybe it was a celebratory feast, of joy!

Now, of course, this was not the end of the story of the Jewish people. They—we—did not live happily ever after. We had many more struggles and challenges.

And likewise, the story of this rise of anti-Semitism that we're experiencing in America, in St. Louis, in University City, is not over. It'll never be a fairy-tale, happily-ever-after ending.

But I have more hope and optimism after Wednesday that we won't be alone in this, that we'll have support and help from so many people, so many groups, and communities near and around us.

Knowing how it felt to have that support, I hope I, as a rabbi and Jew, that we as a congregation, and that our St. Louis Jewish community, and ultimately that each of you, too—will think extra seriously about the role and responsibility we have to be there, with our bodies, our voices, with our phone calls, e-mails, and letters, and with our dollars, for others around us when they need the support we were so lucky to get this week.

I want to conclude with a riff of sorts on Psalm 23, whose familiar words I chanted in Hebrew and we read together in English at the gathering at the cemetery on Wednesday.

The Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want. God leads us to clean green cemeteries, when our waters are not still. And our souls are restored. God leads us in straight paths, for God's name's sake. And when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil, because our friends will be beside us. Their presence, their voices, their words, will comfort us. We will celebrate and feast, and find joy amidst and despite the efforts of our enemies. Our cup runs over, again, and again. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow the challenges we'll face all the days of our lives. And not alone, but only together will we merit to dwell in the house of the Lord, today, tomorrow, and forever.

And let us say, Amen.