

Rabbi Steven Rein
Agudas Achim Congregation
Parashat Vayakhel
9 March 2024

An Open Heart for All

Standing outside a pair of glass doors in City Hall, I was verbally attacked and intimidated. Baby killer. Genocide. Bystander. From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free. The elevator door couldn't open fast enough. The first group went in. The onslaught continued. Finally, it was my turn to enter the elevator, leaving behind what felt like an angry mob. I was then followed to my car by a woman in a hijab, heckling me. I decided to keep walking. Head down. Quickly entering my car and locking the doors. And that is how the evening ended for me and eleven other members of Agudas and Beth El Hebrew Congregation. That was my first foray with the City of Alexandria Human Rights Commission. It wouldn't be my last.

The saga begins with the November meeting of the Alexandria Human Rights Commission. The guest speakers at that meeting were Zeina Azzam, Alexandria's Poet Laureate, Rose Esber, a historian claiming Israel is engaged in ethnic cleansing, and ten other Palestinian Americans and community members. According to the meeting minutes, they provided the commission with a "historical perspective on the conflict between Israel and the State of Palestine and shared the losses that they are experiencing." They urged the City of Alexandria to sign an Apartheid Free Pledge, a resolution recognizing the Nakba of 1948 (the catastrophe suffered by Palestinians), and a resolution calling for a cease-fire. They also distributed a series of maps showing Palestine in 1947 as completely Palestinian land and post-1948 as land occupied by Zionist Jews. A Jewish member of the commission alerted Rabbi David Spinrad of Beth El and me, sharing that our voices are needed to bring some balance to the conversation. We were on the docket for the January meeting.

I immediately reached out to Vicki Fishman of the JCRC, and together with Rabbi Spinrad, we got to work. Since none of us really knew what this commission was, we wanted to understand its function. The Alexandria Human Rights Commission (AHRC) is an official commission of the city government with commissioners appointed by the City Council. The Alexandria Office of Human Rights was established to combat discrimination, increase equal opportunity and protect human rights for persons who live, work, or visit Alexandria. The objective of the commission, according to its bylaws, is to “assure that all citizens of Alexandria are treated fairly, in accordance with all applicable...laws and regulations.” A noble mission indeed, and a mission that has nothing to do with the Middle East. So, we decided that a history lesson, while needed, would not be our focus. I did purchase a copy of Noa Tishby’s book, *Israel: A Simple Guide to the Most Misunderstood Country on Earth*, for every member of the commission. Instead, we recruited 12 members of Agudas and Beth El to share their personal stories of living in Alexandria post-October 7th. Stories from a high school student who hears the words “Heil Hitler” and “six million wasn’t enough” in the hallways of Alexandria City High School, stories of a young mom afraid to put her Hanukkah menorah in her window, stories of a preschool director’s fears of anti-Semitic violence, stories of two synagogues spending tens of thousands of dollars a year for security, and more. Our goal was to focus on the impact here in Alexandria, the actual purview of this commission.

I volunteered to offer closing remarks. I began by telling the story of Miri and Amir Tibon, who called Alexandria their home for three years. I shared Amir’s horrifying account of October 7. I talked about my visit with Miri and Amir in November, displaced from their home. I also shared that I delivered a sermon, on this bima, about the imperative to have compassion for the suffering of all innocent lives – in Israel AND in Gaza. I read the poem of Rachel Goldberg Polin, mother of American hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin, who yearns for the day when a mother in Israel

and a mother in Gaza can grow old together, watching their grandchildren play in peace. Looking directly at the commissioners, I concluded: “There is so much pain in our city right now. Jewish Alexandrians are hurting. Palestinian Alexandrians are hurting. Alexandrians who care about humanity are hurting. Help Alexandrians plant the seed of mutual respect AND dialogue, the seed of understanding, the seed of love. We are many people, many ideas, and many religions, but we are one city; we are ALL Alexandrians.”

At that moment I was feeling good about our presentation. The feedback and conversation seemed productive. I should mention that also present in the room was a large group of Palestinians, as these meetings are open to the public. Our good feelings changed abruptly when it was time to leave. That was the moment we were verbally attacked. The irony was not lost on us that this belligerent treatment took place outside the doors of a human rights conversation. The next day, I received a lengthy apology from the Office of Human Rights’ acting legal director. She had alerted the City Manager’s Office and would send a clear message that this isn’t acceptable behavior for members of the public during, before, and after meetings. She also shared that her legal advice to the commission will be NOT to take a position on a ceasefire resolution as it goes beyond the scope of the commission. Her recommendation to the commission will remain that they facilitate opportunities for dialogue between members of different communities in Alexandria and ensure everyone feels safe in the city. Nonetheless, a resolution was drafted. The saga continues.

The draft resolution was littered with problems, inaccuracies, and omissions. The draft makes the claim that Israel is targeting civilians and conducting indiscriminate retaliation, compares Israel’s actions to the genocide in Sudan, and calls for a cease-fire and the release of hostages of “both sides.” There was no condemnation of Hamas and the atrocities they committed nor a call for the dismantling of Hamas. There was no affirmation of Israel’s right to exist and

defend itself. And equating civilian hostages to convicted criminals completely delegitimizes the legal system of the democratic State of Israel. Once again, we got to work. Rabbi Spinrad, Vicki, and I would be sharing remarks during the February meeting's public comment period.

We entered the conference room on February 20th. This time, two Alexandria Police Officers were present. Public comment began. Again, there were over a dozen Palestinian supporters present. One by one, they spoke of genocide. They compared Israel to Nazi Germany. They accused the city's silence as a violation of the phrase "never again." Tensions were escalating. Individuals were yelling and shouting at the commissioners. One individual, full of rage, declared that "The United States is abetting a genocide, [and]...there is no greater threat to this world; there is no greater crime." *These* words were shared by a young Jewish woman wearing a kippah and Palestinian keffiyeh. Once again, it was our turn to speak. Rabbi Spinrad and Vicki spoke about the many inherent problems with the draft resolution and many of the comments being made. Once again, I offered our concluding statement.

I began by reminding everyone that a month ago, at the last AHRC meeting, I spoke about an Alexandrian who was nearly killed by Hamas on Oct 7. Following that meeting, I was verbally attacked and intimidated. Sadly, demonization, heartlessness, and abject antisemitism have, it seems, become politically and socially acceptable. I shared that as a rabbi, I represent over 500 families here in Alexandria. Many of these families are afraid to be Jewish in public. They are fearful of intimidation and potential violence, including their children in ACPS. No one should feel unsafe in Alexandria. And no one should think that while advocating for peace abroad, it's okay to stoke division and hate at home. The Alexandria City Council was not elected, nor are they qualified, to undertake complex foreign policy. It is naïve to think that in a conference room, we can decide our City's official position on a crisis as fraught as this. Rather, we should be creating

opportunities for conversation, for people to rally around our common values, advocate for peace, and support human life. We should be coming together, supporting each other, seeking the cohesion at home that we hope for abroad. This resolution will do the opposite.

Let me be clear, I said, my heart breaks for the people of Gaza. This war has caused immense damage and destruction. Every day, I pray for peace and want to see this end. I would love to see a ceasefire. But a ceasefire is only part of a solution. Remember, on May 21, 2021, Egypt brokered a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, ending 11 days of fighting. That ceasefire held until Oct 7, when Hamas attacked and ended the ceasefire. If we do anything, we should resolve to turn down the volume and begin healing. When we advocate for people thousands of miles away, we should still care for the people who are right here in Alexandria, the people who are in pain and are afraid. We are all Alexandrians. We don't close people off; we open our arms, our minds, and our hearts. We must proudly declare that life is sacred, that we are stronger united, and that we all deserve to express ourselves without fear, ridicule, retribution, or division.

Last week, we sent a pointed letter to the commissioners, the Mayor and the City Council. I have no doubt that this saga is far from over. I am and remain frustrated, angry, and heartbroken over this. Tonight is Rosh Hodesh Adar II, the month of Purim. It is a time of increased joy and a time to think about our hearts. The heart is probably not the first thing we think of when we think about Purim. Yet if we look closely, we find that Haman's heart is, in fact, a subtle but central factor in the story of Esther. Throughout the narrative, Haman's heart is referenced as the seat of his joy and his rage, his emotional center. Haman's prideful, angry, and seemingly closed-off heart leads ultimately to a perversion of law and ensuing violence and slaughter. Yet, hearts that are generous and open, as we are commanded to be on Purim, can help redress inequities, bringing people on the margins of society to the center and bringing the Divine presence into the world.

In the words of author, educator, and activist Parker Palmer: “If you hold your knowledge of self and world wholeheartedly, your heart will at times get broken by loss, failure, defeat, betrayal, or death. What happens next in you and the world around you depends on *how* your heart breaks. If it breaks *apart* into a thousand pieces, the result may be anger, depression, and disengagement. If it breaks *open* into a greater capacity to hold the complexities and contradictions of human experience, the result may be new life. The heart is what makes us human – and politics, which is the use of power to order our life together, is a profoundly human enterprise. Politics in the hands of those whose hearts have been broken open, not apart, helps us hold our differences creatively and use our power courageously for the sake of a more equitable, just, and compassionate world” (*Healing the Heart of Democracy*, 18). Perhaps it is only fitting that Parashat Vayakhel mentions the word *lev* – heart – 13 times in the building of God’s sacred space. Holiness begins with the heart.

Yesterday, we officially announced our solidarity mission to Israel in May – “Rekindling Hope, Supporting Israel.” We will embark on a trip centered around the transformation of Israeli society and the Jewish community in the aftermath of October 7th - sending a message of unparalleled hope and resilience to Israel and its people. There will be opportunities to volunteer at Israel’s National Food Bank and assemble care packages for Israeli evacuees. We will visit Nahal Oz with Amir. We will talk about resilience through food with Yarden’s mom. We will celebrate Yom Ha’atzmaut with Yasmin’s family. We will visit Miri and Amir at Mishmar Ha’emek. And we will meet with Mohammad Darawshe, an Arab leader and activist whose cousin Awad was murdered at the Nova Music Festival. Together, we will experience a breaking heart, a mending heart, and a heart that yearns for peace.

I don't know how the saga with the Alexandria Human Rights Commission will end. I will let you know what happens next. What I do know is that our Sages teach us to be like the disciples of Aaron: אוֹהֵב שְׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם, אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וּמִקְרִיבָן לַתּוֹרָה – love peace and pursue peace, love human beings and draw them close to Torah. The invitation and charge for us all is to grow our hearts to do the same.