

We are living in highly polarized times, times when it seems everyone chooses sides. You either believe Black Lives Matter or you support the police. You either stand with Israel, or you want to free Palestine.

This polarization has been on full display here in Montreal this week, as pro-Israeli demonstrators were attacked by pro-Palestinian demonstrators, who in turn were dispersed by the police who fired tear gas into the mob to break up the violence.

In this week's Torah portion, Naso, certain people are to be removed from the camp. In Numbers chapter 5 the Torah commands us,

Instruct the Israelites to remove from camp anyone with an eruption or a discharge and anyone defiled by a corpse. Remove male and female alike; put them outside the camp so that they do not defile the camp of those in whose midst I dwell.

In today's world we don't put people outside the camp for eruptions on their skin or discharges from their genitals. We put them outside the camp for holding opinions we disagree with. Every group – and it doesn't matter whether it's "woke" students on college campuses or Trump supporters, polices its boundaries and generally brooks no dissent from the party line, whether the party line is that the police should be defunded or it's that the American elections were stolen.

In Israel the extreme right has shown how far some will go in drowning out any voices of dissent. Four Jewish journalists for Israeli TV station N12 have been assigned police protection after receiving death threats from right wing activists who don't like their coverage of the conflict. The prime minister's son, Yair Netanyahu, is egging the extremists on, calling on protestors to gather at the N12 offices, tweeting "Say no to the media's anti-Zionist brainwashing."

The Israeli police commissioner, Kobi Shabtai, had the temerity to say, "There were terrorists from both sides, and we will bring every one of them to justice." His boss, right wing politician Amir Ohana, was offended. He called the statement "outrageous remarks that did not need to be said." In a tweet Ohana blamed everything on the Arabs, even though there is well-documented evidence of Jews attacking Arabs as well.

The other side is certainly equally unwilling to hear anything they don't like. Pro-Palestinian protestors in Berlin threw firecrackers at an Israeli journalist when they heard her speaking Hebrew.

There are some situations where the moral evaluation is cut and dried. In World War II the Nazis and the Japanese were clearly aggressors. There was no ambiguity in that war.

People try and make the situation in Israel seem as if it's just as cut and dried as World War II was: one side or the other represents the good guys, and the other side is evil.

But the truth about the situation in Israel is much more complex than that. It's not a simple either / or. It's more "yes, and."

F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function."

Here are two opposing ideas people who care about Israel need to be able to hold:

1. Israel does not treat Palestinians living in the West Bank very nicely. Checkpoints, restrictions on movement, home demolitions, land confiscation, lack of progress on peace negotiations and more give Palestinians valid complaints about Israeli treatment.
2. Hamas is a terrorist organization responsible for the suffering of the people in Gaza and Israel is fully entitled to defend itself from terrorist rocket attacks.

Israelis and Palestinians must learn to live with each other. Neither one is going anywhere. If peace is to come, both sides must be able to hear the pain of the other side. This is a value we learn from a few different sources in the Jewish tradition.

In Pirkei Avot Rabban Gamliel says

וְאַל תִּדְיִן אֶת חֲבֵרְךָ עַד שֶׁתִּגִּיעַ לְמִקוֹמוֹ,

don't judge your fellow until you've reached his place

In other words, don't judge a person until you've walked a mile in his shoes.

The need to hear multiple points of view is also highlighted in a very interesting piece of Jewish law. If the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court of the late Second Temple Period ever had a unanimous verdict to convict in a capital case with no one expressing opposition a mistrial was declared. Which seems so opposite to our normal mentality, where a unanimous verdict would be seen as a good thing, as proof of a person's guilt. The rabbis teach there's always some other perspective to see – as one later rabbi said, if nothing else someone could raise the insanity defense.

Rabbi Haviva Ner-David is an Israeli Orthodox rabbi, an immigrant from America and mother of seven who lives in the north of Israel. She recently published a novel, *Hope Valley*, which is an allegory for the struggles between the two peoples living in Israel, in the form of the story of a friendship between two women, one a Jewish Israeli and the other a Palestinian Israeli. She writes from the perspective of both. In her blog, Rabbi Ner-David said,

I was in the process of figuring out the best way to tell this story, and all along, I think I knew, that the best way to make the story come alive would be to try stepping into Ruby's shoes (the Palestinian character). But I did not know if I could manage it. It was a challenging task.

She did manage it, and it's what makes that book a hopeful story – if both people can understand each other, maybe, just maybe, we can figure out how to live together in peace.

When it comes to polarization, some people go too far in the opposite direction. They become so tuned in to the pain of the other that they lose sight of the pain of their own people.

A group of rabbinical students from all the major non-Orthodox seminaries in North America, including the Conservative Movement's JTS and Ziegler schools, wrote a letter addressed to the "Heart of the Jewish Community." In their letter they are harshly critical of Israel and paint the Palestinians as innocent victims.

In their letter the students ask,

What will it take for us to see that our Israel has the military and controls the borders? How many Palestinians must lose their homes, their schools, their lives, for us to understand that today, in 2021, Israel's choices come from a place of power and that Israel's actions constitute an intentional removal of Palestinians?

They wrote this at a time when millions of Israelis are running to bomb shelters, when Hamas has fired nearly 4,000 rockets at Israel, when 12 Israelis have been killed by rocket attacks, without mentioning the many ways in which Hamas is terrorizing not only Israel but their own people, who are afraid to speak out against Hamas.

While it's important to see the pain of the other side – and the Palestinians have many valid complaints against Israel – it's also important not to lose sight of the pain of your own people and brethren. While it's appropriate to take responsibility for the actions of our side, it's foolish to ignore the responsibilities of the other side. If Hamas had spent the time since the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2006 building a country instead of building terrorist infrastructure, the people of Gaza would be living much better lives today. We can, and must, be able to hold two seemingly contradictory things in our heads and hearts at the same time.

We pray for a speedy and peaceful resolution to the current crisis, so that both peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, can live in peace and security.