



November 30, 2023

Dear Hevreh/Friends,

These remarks below were delivered at our in-person-only program on Israel with Dan Terris and myself, held on Nov 12, 2023. For those who were unable to join us in person, I have been asked to share my remarks. As always, I am here for all of us. If you'd like to be in touch with me to discuss or process anything at all, please don't hesitate to reach out and schedule a time to connect.

*Kindness & Shalom,
Rabbi Darby Leigh*

Friends,

It has been a really hard month for me and for all of us. Each of us is carrying something different at this moment, perhaps there are places where we overlap but I make no assumptions about where anyone is at this moment. There are members of our community who had a family member murdered on October 7th. Community members who are Israeli and for whom Israel is home. Some of us have parents, siblings, cousins, family who live in Israel or have lived there for months or years. Some of us currently live part-time in Israel and have deep relationships in the West Bank. Many of us have spent a great deal of time there and feel profoundly connected to the land and the people there. Some of us who perhaps have never been there. Some of us perhaps do not feel as deep of a connection. We are all in different places and carrying different things.

Nevertheless, since October 7th for most of us, I believe, the world has changed dramatically and we are still trying to find new ground beneath our feet. While we are still adjusting to our new experience of being in this world, we also see that many of our friends and peers are carrying on as if everything were, "normal" or as if this were just "another round" of fighting in the Middle East. For many of us in the Jewish community

this, amidst the soaring Anti-Semitism and the global anti-Israel or anti-Jewish demonstrations and sentiment, have led to a profound feeling of loneliness, isolation, and a renewed feeling of being “other.”

We have now been in this new space for a month, a 30-day period that we crossed last week and referred to in mourning as sheloshim. At the sheloshim mark, mourners are forced to confront the reality that while everything has changed forever for them, and there is no going back, they also need to begin figuring out how they will move forward in their new existence.

I too, have been struggling with this concept and this question of how to move forward in a moment which continues to be fraught with so much pain, fear, anguish, anger, and ongoing death and destruction. In my meetings and conversations with people, I have been asking what people are carrying and I have been encouraging folks to identify and name their truths. What is the firm ground for you that you can absolutely stand on? There may be more than one truth for each of us, and some of our own truths may be in contradiction with each other inside of ourselves, making it truly hard, if not almost impossible to hold both simultaneously.

In many ways, this is an essential teaching and practice of the Jewish spiritual path. Learning how to hold multiple truths, learning and accepting that two things can be true at the same time, even if they are in contradiction with each other. One well-known example of this from the Hasidic tradition are the two slips of paper we are encouraged to carry, one in each pocket. One that says it is for my sake the world was created, and the other says, “I am but dust and ashes.”

Two profound teachings that seem to be in opposition to each other, according to Jewish wisdom are actually both true.

When I was young in my earliest years of Hebrew School, I remember a text that had been taped up on the wall in colorful construction paper, spelling out in bubble-type letters. Rabbi Hillel said, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I, and If not now, when?” It was many, many years later that I came to learn that this is actually a text from the Mishnah, found in Pirke Avot 1:14. Hu Haya Omer, Im ayn ani li, mi li, uksheh ani l’atzmi, mah ani? V’im lo achshav, aiymatai?

The text contains three questions. The first two deal with questions of universalism and particularism and the tension between them, and the third question deals with time and the urgency of our lives and this moment.

I have come to feel that over the past few decades as liberal Judaism has grown in the United States and as the second and third generations of Jewish immigrants have come of age and become more and more accepted in civil society, somewhat dependent on geography of course, liberal Judaism has become increasingly focused on the second question, "If I am only for myself, what am I?" and we, as a movement and as a people, have focused a great deal of attention on others; the civil rights movement, the movement for LGBTQ equality, issues of poverty, homelessness and food insecurity, all of which of course includes Jews, but our engagement with each of these begins with a focus on a category of people who we recognize need support and help in order to have access to the experience of self determination and to be able to lead whole and complete, meaningful lives.

In other words, the muscle of universalism is strong in liberal Judaism, if I am only for myself, what am I? The answer is, of course, not much, so therefore let me use my position, my relative privilege, and power to provide support to others and to pull other people up. There's much to like about this experience because in addition to being righteous, it makes us feel good about ourselves and how we are using our own lives. We focus on teachings and concepts in Jewish tradition that reinforce this like "b'tzelem elokim" we are all created in the image of G-d and "tikkun olam," repairing the world, which are, of course meaningful Jewish concepts and values.

At the same time, we have to be able to hold multiple truths, because you can only approach Universalism from the Particular, and Jews have only survived for as long as we have because we also have a strong sense of particularism, of peoplehood, of feeling profound connections to other Jews across time and space. We have always had an understanding that we take care of each other, we take care of our own because the first question in this Mishnah asks, *Im ayn ani li, mi li*, "If I am not for myself who will be for me?" And deep down we know that the answer is quite possibly, nobody.

And there can be no confusion about the urgency of this moment, as the third question in our text asks, if not now, when? Between the sheer numbers of our family members who were raped, tortured, murdered, and slaughtered on October 7th (I don't have to recount those details,) the captives still being held against their will, our brothers and sisters, small children, grandparents, held in underground tunnels and prisons suffering who knows what, and the acts of violence in threats, words, and actions that have been perpetrated against Jewish bodies, communities, and spaces since then come perhaps as a stark reminder, that being Jewish matters. It is actually a matter of life and death as even in 2023 there are entire organizations, communities, and political entities, committed to the death and eradication of the Jewish people.

It has been painful to recognize just how quickly the events of October 7th and the plight of the captives seems to have vanished from global consciousness, or worse, how it has been justified with atrociously offensive victim blaming. And the Jewish people are so small that we are all impacted. Most of us and certainly most Israelis are only one or two degrees of separation from knowing someone murdered on October 7th or knowing someone killed in the ongoing loss of life among IDF soldiers. It's too much.

And yet the global community doesn't compute this. We are all hearing a lot of "it's complicated", "Why were they living there?", "Shouldn't they have known better?", "What did you expect was going to happen?" Even worse, there has been no shortage of glee at the violence perpetrated upon Israelis and Jews, as if the world has seen us get some kind of comeuppance, or get what we deserved. This creates a searing pain in the Jewish spirit.

And the wisdom our ancestors have left us is in the task of holding multiple truths. Multiple truths, *uksheh ani l'atzmi, mah ani*, "If I am only for myself, what am I?" As I wrote in my recent letter, "It is possible to care about more than one group of people at a time." Our hearts are all stretching and forced to hold so much more pain than ever before and we are also challenged at this moment to stretch our muscles of love and compassion to encompass all innocence and humanity.

The world is focused on the resulting devastation Hamas has created in Gaza. And yes, the Israeli government is visiting horrible military deaths upon innocent Palestinians in Gaza, families killed, children suffering, And thousands displaced, and I am equally if not more horrified by what is taking place in the West Bank. Increasing random illegal settler violence and death being visited upon Palestinians.

It is so hard to figure out how to hold all of this. Whenever I find myself sinking into despair thinking about my brothers and sisters held captive, or from hearing an eyewitness account or description of a video of an atrocity committed on October 7th, I sink, and then I quickly think about the small children who become trapped beneath the rubble in Gaza or those who are killed because of military activity or bombing, and then I think about the victims of October 7th and the 250,000 Israelis who are displaced because the communities in the south are uninhabitable and in the North, rocket fire comes in from Hezbollah in Lebanon, and then I think about Hamas' cruelty in building command centers and weapon stockpiles in schools, mosques, underneath hospitals, and the resulting pain visited upon innocent civilians, and my head and my heart go around and around at a dizzying speed. It's too much.

It is so hard to hold this all. Judaism teaches us that we have to figure out how to be able to hold multiple truths, and there are many things that are true at this moment. I don't have answers, I have lots of thoughts and feelings and opinions and emotions and one other teaching to offer. There is another text from the Talmud that should inform our consciousness, as well at this moment, Kol Yisrael Aravim zeh ba zeh, all of Israel, all of us are responsible for each other.

I want to suggest that it would be valuable for each of us to spend some time thinking about what we mean by the word Yisrael. What is Israel? When I translate the Shema into ASL with communities, I always stop at the second word, Shema Yisrael for a discussion. How we choose to translate Yisrael into ASL depends on what we mean. Do we mean the land, the Biblical concept, the modern-day state, the current government, a mythic idea, the people am Yisrael, G-d wrestlers? (Israel is also my father's middle name.) Of course, it's all of these but there is a different ASL sign for each of those concepts and translating the Shema into ASL, requires picking one.

Even if we are distressed by the actions of the current government, or by that of the settlers in the West Bank, it is important to remember that millions of Israelis, brothers and sisters, mishpacha in the land of Israel, feel the same. Support for the current government of Israel is low and even now there are protests for Netanyahu and numerous far right ministers to resign. There are joint Arab/Israeli peace organizations (RHR, Arava, Women Wage Peace and others) who are beyond devastated at this moment but continuing to be in conversation with each other, Israelis and Palestinians continuing their work together, because they have no choice, their very survival depends on it and they know it.

When I feel despondent and as though I wish to throw my hands up at the whole thing, I am buoyed by the work of these organization and by the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who were in the streets marching, protesting, rallying against their conservative, racist, anti-democratic political leaders, protesting in order to create a more just Israel, a Jewish world that they believe truly reflects Jewish ethics and values. They waved the Israeli flag and sang HaTikvah throughout the weeks of protests because they refused to abandon the symbols of the Jewish nation to those who they feel are twisting the future of the Jewish state into something it was never meant to be, and must not be.

Our Israeli family members, coming together immediately after October 7th to create social support systems for each other that the government was incapable of establishing, millions of Israelis wrapping themselves in Israeli flag, sending their children to the IDF, while, believing as many members of Kerem Shalom do, that we must find another way. Believing that as Judaism teaches, we must be able to live with multiple truths and that we have to find space for the painful ones that seem to contradict each other but are true nonetheless, these family members of ours, they need us, they need to know that diaspora Jewry sees them and not only their government. It is true that many of us can identify with the experience of having political leaders who we feel do not reflect us nor our values.

The anti-Israel sentiments being expressed around the world, and right here at home, are incapable of holding nuance, we have to do that. Chief Mulcahy called me this past week to let me know of anti-Israel flyers that had been posted in Concord, MA's town center; a friend sent me graffiti from Washington DC that said, "death to Israel;" the anti-Israel protests, rallies and demonstrations on college campuses are not able to hold nuance. We have all seen the videos of the demonstrations around the world. The global anti-Israel sentiment cannot reflect the nuance and diversity that exists within Israel and within the Jewish community, and the insidiousness of Anti-Semitism will hold all Jews responsible for what happens in Israel regardless of our own personal political leanings.

Israel needs us, our family needs our support, they need our kinship, they need our caring. Kol Yisrael aravim zeh ba zeh, We are all responsible for one another. We have to have each others back.

I am grateful that at the March in DC on Tuesday, November 14th, The March for Israel, to free hostages and against Anti-Semitism, there was a "peace bloc" with folks from Truah, J Street, APN, the Reconstructionist movement and numerous others reflecting the importance of holding multiple truths.

I am grateful that the Israeli protestors waved the Israeli flag and sang HaTikvah and refused to abandon the symbols of the Jewish nation, because the Israeli flag and HaTikvah, The Hope, belongs to us, to all of us, they belong to you.

Being able to move forward from sheloshim means being able to live with and honor multiple truths. Hu Haya Omer, Im ayn ani li, mi li, uksheh ani l'atzmi, mah ani? V'im lo achshav, aiymatai?

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? "If I am only for myself, what am I", and "If not now, when?"