

*The Courage to Engage:
Holding the Many Narratives of Israel/Palestine
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
Rosh Hashanah Second Day 5782*

On July 31, 2002, a bomb went off in the Frank Sinatra Cafeteria at Hebrew University, killing nine people, injuring 85, fourteen of them seriously. I remember that day. I was living in Israel, I was up north working at a summer camp. Although I did not know them personally, two of the people killed and one of the people injured were part of my extended community in Jerusalem. This attack was perpetrated by Mohammad Odeh, a Palestinian citizen of Israel from the Silwan neighborhood in East Jerusalem. Odeh was the father of a five year old and an infant. Mohammad Odeh was convicted on nine counts of murder.

This summer I read a memoir: *What Do You Buy the Children of the Terrorist Who Tried to Kill Your Wife?* by David Harris-Gershon¹, the husband of Jamie Harris-Gershon who was critically injured in the attack. It is the story of David's journey, both psychological and political, to seek understanding and to heal. This journey took him to meet the Odeh family in Silwan to search for deeper answers that would help him try to understand why someone, who lived not too far from where he lived with his wife, would commit such an atrocity.

Harris-Gershon recounts what he said to the Odeh family when he met them:

¹ Oneworld Book, 2013

“I want you to know that I’m not here for revenge, that I have not come here out of anger. I simply want to understand you, to understand better Mohammad and how he could have done something so horrible. Whether we like it or not, we are connected by Mohammad’s actions. And rather than think of you as enemies, and forget about you, I’ve decided to try to understand who you are and how this could have happened”.²

I am so moved by his courage. The enormous leap of faith. The determination to dig deep into a painful experience in order to learn, to understand, to question assumptions that he had had all his life. Harris-Gershon is very explicit that he is not on a journey of forgiveness but of understanding. In his words: “While Mohammad’s murderous plot had brought me face-to face with an undeniable barbarous element woven into the fringe of Palestinian society, I had also been brought face-to face with his family. And what I saw was a normal people. A kind people. A broken people. I saw people who feared military uniforms, feared casual bureaucratic encounters, feared a knock on the door telling them that a child had been taken to prison... A people tired of the fear”.³

Gershon-Harris does something that most of us have a hard time doing, accepting that there are multiple narratives and multiple truths in one story -- even when doing so means facing the evil that brought so much suffering to his own life. I, personally, went through a similar journey. For many years I felt very confused in my own views, especially as someone who had also suffered the loss of my mother in a terrorist

² *What Do You Buy the Children of the Terrorist Who Tried to Kill Your Wife?* by David Harris-Gershon, Page 294

³ Page 303

attack. This attack was perpetrated by people with similar ideologies to Mohammad Odeh. While living in Israel I was invited once to a festival called Sulha. Sulha is a grassroots organisation of Jews, Muslims, and Christians, Israelis, Palestinians, who seek to develop a culture of coexistence inspired by the Middle Eastern indigenous process of mediation, Sulha. That was the first time that I shared my own story, with a Palestinian. I remember being afraid and I remember saying that I was afraid to hate them because of what happened to my family. As the Palestinian person listened to me, he cried and asked for forgiveness. Then he shared his story, the story of his people, the story of his own suffering. I cried with him. It was then that I decided that I would open my heart to learn the story of who I thought was my enemy and I would share my own story.

We are about to read the story of the binding of Isaac, the Akedah. This reading recounts the climactic event in the life of Abraham, the ultimate trial of faith. God asks him to offer up his son as a sacrifice.

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹוֹ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test.

God said to him, “Abraham,” and he answered, “Here I am.”

וַיֹּאמֶר קוֹחַ־נָפֹא אֶת־בְּנֹוֹ אֶת־יִחִידָוֹ אֲשֶׁר־אַהַבְתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְלֹו־לֹוֹ אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַמִּצְרַיִם וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל

אַחַד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹוֹ:

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And God said, “Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac,
and go to the land of Moriah,
and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights
that I will point out to you.”

This is the story we know, that we tell and we interpret. We ask questions about it and we struggle with it. We study it and we are inspired by it. This is our story. But this year I decided to dig somewhere else. I decided to learn about the parallel story found in the Quran -- a similar but different narrative. Yes, Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son, his only son. In the Quran the only son of Abraham is Ishmael. Isaac has not even been born yet. His birth is announced after the story of the binding of Ishamel. Ayaz Afsar, the vice president of Academics at the International Islamic University in Islamabad, in a comparative study of the Intended Sacrifice of Isaac/Ishamel in the Bible and Quran compares these stories, their intentions, their language, their narratives, the different roles played by each of the characters. Afsar writes: “The two narratives use common motifs, like the divine command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, the attempt to execute the command, supernatural intervention and the provision of a substitute. However they are different in identifying the intended sacrificial son, i.e Ishamel or Isaac, in the details they give to the site of the sacrifice, in their attitudes towards the command and in expressing the nature of the promise after the trial”⁴. I can go on and on telling all the differences and similarities I

⁴ A Comparative Study of the Intended Sacrifice of Isaac/Ishmael in the Bible and the Qur'an, AYAZ AFSAR

learned from this academic article and I can tell you that I was fascinated by this learning. Mostly the notion that a story that is so embedded in our own narrative and legacy is told differently in another nation and religion. Learning a new narrative does not minimize the importance, centrality and even the truth of our own story, but it widens our understanding that there are different narratives and different truths. Is it Ishmael, the *Yechidcha*, the unique, the loved, the special son of Abraham? Or is it Isaac? How do we feel when we realize that the story as told by the Quran doesn't make Isaac the main character of this defining and important story?

We know that narratives that are core to our national identities as Jews and as Palestinians also differ in fundamental ways. Not only biblical but also in our modern story. 1948 -- the founding of the modern State of Israel, an experience of triumph and jubilation for Jews, a narrative of rebirth. For Palestinians, 1948 marks catastrophe, loss of homeland, a narrative of tragedy. What do we do with the differences in our narratives? What do we do when the clash in narratives leads to devastating violence as we saw with Mohammed Odeh? Do we choose the path of understanding and engagement, as did Harris-Gershon, or do we simply condemn and turn away?

This past spring, once again we witnessed violence erupt in Israel - between Israelis and Palestinians, between Jews and Muslims. We witnessed attacks and counterattacks, and the even more cruel turn of angry Jewish mobs and angry Arab mobs confronting each other in the streets of Israel. This latest round of violence, lent strength to those who oppose peaceful co-existence between a Jewish State and a Palestinian State.

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Although we may feel that this violence has set back the decades of coexistence efforts between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel, and although we may feel that the possibility of side-by-side Israeli and Palestinian states seems near to impossible, and although we have seen the discourse around the Israeli and Palestinian conflict become even more polarized, I feel strongly that we need to be even more committed to the work of engaging with and standing with all those who are committed to peace. We need to engage and stand with Palestinians who may forever relate to history differently than we do -- the Palestinian national narrative will never be a Jewish national narrative -- but who nonetheless believe in a future where Jews and Palestinians can both live in safety and dignity.

How do we, the TBZ community grow in our understanding, reach out in peace, and support those who stand for peace? What does this look like for our community? As I asked these questions, I realized I wanted to go to Israel. That we need to go to Israel. We need to learn our own story, our narrative, and then we need to go further and reach beyond our own. We need to deepen our understanding of the story of the other. We need to have just a bit of the audacity and determination of David Harris-Gershon to try to understand, to dwell in the pain, and go deeper in our understanding. We need to learn that we can hold our story - our truth and our pain, our suffering and our dream of a State of Israel -- with a more open heart to the story of the Palestinian people.

I shared this vision with my friend and colleague Rabbi Andy Vogel, from Temple Sinai who immediately shared with me that he was thinking the same and we decided to plan a trip together.

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So, I am pleased to announce that “Covid permitting” TBZ and Temple Sinai are planning a Multiple Narrative Trip to Israel and the West Bank. This will be a chance to connect or re-connect with Israel and to explore the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in detail and on the ground from multiple perspectives and multiple narratives.

Together we will focus on Jewish spiritual encounters in Israel, on understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict’s roots, on meeting Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers and activists. Together, with both rabbis - Rabbi Andy Vogel and myself -- we will study, pray, sing and celebrate. We will also challenge ourselves to really listen to unfamiliar perspectives, to stories that may conflict with our own stories. The tour will be facilitated by two tour guides: one Jewish, one Palestinian; with encounters in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Ramallah, Bethlehem & Haifa. The dates of the trip are: February 16-26, 2022. (*A flyer of the trip can be found at the entrance of the Sanctuary.*)

My friend, TBZ member and CEO of Keshet, Idit Klein (and who is present here today) speaks of Jews’ relationship with Israel in this most powerful way: “I know there are those among us for whom Israel is core to our soul. We think about it often. We go there. We rejoice and grieve with the People of Israel. Many of us also rejoice and grieve with the Palestinian people. We see no contradiction there. Others of us don’t think of Israel often and feel like it is an unhelpful distraction from the work we want to be doing. I understand the temptation to entirely avoid Israel — because it is painful, because it is complicated, because it is fraught politically — but I believe we cannot. Like it or not, Israel is the most prominent project of the Jewish people. It is

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the single most visible and dramatic representation of the Jewish story. We have no choice but to engage.”

I invite those of you who are able to engage to come with me on this journey. And if coming on this trip physically is not possible, this is a teaching that goes beyond a multi-narrative trip to Israel. As we are guided this High Holy Days by Psalm 118, verses 5-6.

מִן הַמִּצָּר קָרָאתִי יְהוָה עֲנֵנִי בְּמַרְחָב יְהוָה.
יְהוָה לִי לֹא אֵירָא מִה יַעֲשֶׂה לִי אָדָם.

In my distress I cried to Yah, Who answers me by setting me free.
Adonai is with me, I shall not fear; What can mortals do to me?

I see this teaching as another opportunity for us to think about how we can confront uncomfortable truths from a place of openness, a place of *merchav*. Sometimes our narrow views do not allow us to see beyond. This is true not only in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or in the biblical narratives that we read. This is true in almost everything in our lives. Our stories are true, our narratives are true, they are our own experiences, but there are other true stories, narratives, and experiences -- true even if they seem to contradict our own! Can we open our hearts, our minds, to more expansive ways of seeing and understanding? What do we need for that to be possible? What may we, and our entire community, gain in the process? I have so much faith in this community and in our capacity together to do hard, courageous work. May we all be blessed with enormous hearts and wisdom and the ability to truly see one another in this coming year and always.

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Shaba Tova!

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