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The Urgent Need for Civil Discourse on Israel¹ *Parashat Noah*

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- How many of you have ever felt ill at ease having a conversation about Israel with people with whom you disagree?
- How many of you have felt frustrated talking about Israel, or experienced any form of alienation, antagonism, or damaged relationship in talking about Israel?

I would love us to draw out these stories and hear what's most alive in your experiences. In my few minutes now, I'm going to speak about the ways Israel has become the most volatile, wedge issue in American Jewish life, why that should urgently concern us, and what we can do about it.

There are three prevailing, current avenues for Israel engagement in American Jewish life:

1. **Avoidance.** I was in a room recently with many national luminaries of the Jewish social justice movement, and almost every one of them has an organizational policy to avoid Israel. We can't possibly, they say, build a coalition on issues like the environment, Darfur, or poverty if we touch Israel. It's too much of a troublesome powder keg. Rabbis of every denomination, Conservative, Reform, and Orthodox, and from across the country, have voiced fear of saying *anything* about Israel; as one of them put it to me recently, I'm not going to get fired for my politics on health care. But I fear I could get fired for just about anything I say about Israel. Rabbi Scott Perlo calls this "the death by Israel" sermon.
2. The second avenue: **Mutual antagonism.** Mutual vilification, ad hominem attacks, caricatures and distortions of each other's positions. Unraveled relationships in families, synagogues, national and local Jewish communities. Friendships lost, parents and children estranged over Israel.
3. The third option I call "**avoidance 2.0**". That is, Israel-related advocacy and activism that involves congregating, conferencing, and talking exclusively to those with whom we agree. That is, the Jewish people splinters into self-affirming nuclei of our respective organizations, each of them

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morally superior and self-certain, talking past one another, or now and then colliding in frustration and hostility. We each rally, mobilize and take pride in the numbers of those who are with us, while dismissing those who aren't as dangerous, ignorant, malicious or loony.

OR: in another version of avoidance 2.0: we say there *is* no problem here. That is, as long as we play it safe, addressing Israel without touching our core differences or any possible area of contention.

These are the three predominant modes of Israel engagement current in American Jewish life.

Our *parshiot* this week and next teach that such estrangement is common for us as human beings, but we are called to a better way.

Parashat Noah is obsessed with sin. But strangely, the Biblical text leaves ambiguous what exactly is so reprehensible about the behavior of the flood and Bavel generations.

For the rabbis, this gap in the text is an invitation to wax ethical. Was the great sin of these two generations rampant violence or robbery? Sexual immorality or idolatry?

Or might it have been some vice underlying, and giving rise, to all of the above? This is what one strand of tradition teaches, beginning in the Tosefta: the common pathology of the flood *and* Bavel generations was arrogance, hubristic pride, total inflation of ego and absorption in self.

Aviva Zorenberg, contemporary Torah scholar, builds on this tradition brilliantly.

I will quote her at length. This is her profound response to the question of what was the Great Sin:

[It] is the arrogant passion of the self, for whom no Other exists ... A way of saying, in the words of the midrash, "Either me or you..." (Breishit Rabah 38:6). The essential paradigmatic act of sin is thus an act of rapacious self-assertion, which sweeps away all other 'worlds,' all other selves... a colonial expansionism that radically denies the existence of other worlds of self and culture... The main problem of the[se generations] is the very converse of Love. [For] Love is to be identified with curiosity, with attentiveness to the self-made worlds of others.

What is the undoing, the consummate wrongfulness, of the flood and Bavel generations? Self-absorption that leaves no room for responsiveness or empathy toward the realities of others. **Incuriosity** (the opposite of curiosity) about others' ways of experiencing things that begets all manners of cruelty. Violence, robbery, sexual assault: the most extreme expressions of using others' for our own needs with no attentiveness to theirs. But it is not just these extreme expressions of denying others' experiences that the *midrash* condemns; it is all manner of collapsing into our own perceptions and assumptions, closing off to the possibility of opening and responding to other points of view.

Our coming *parashah*, *Lech L'cha*, which we'll begin to read this afternoon, opens with the antithetical image of the flood and Bavel generations' arrogance and self-absorption in the humility of our forefather

Avraham. *Lech L'cha* begins with God's famous call to Avraham: " *Lech l'cha mei'artzcha* 'Go from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.'"

Let go of everything stable in your life; break from everything you know, everything from which you draw meaning and mooring, and I'll take you somewhere. You'll have to wait and see where.

Here the *midrash* teaches: it is this dramatic willingness to destabilize and stretch himself, this openness to being challenged and changed, to embarking on an unpredictable and risky journey, that makes Avraham *Avraham*, worthy of being an enlightened teacher and the founder of our religion.

Exploration – widening our scope of possibility, wandering out of our comfort zones and complacency – is at the very core of our identity and calling as Jews, as children of Abraham, down to our very names. The verb *avar*, at the root of our name as *Ivrim* (Hebrews), literally means to cross over to the other side (as in to cross over to the river's other bank): to confront what we don't yet know or understand, but may yet illuminate us.

So one way of reading the stories of the flood, Babel, and Avraham stories back-to-back is to learn that the paradigmatic sin is incuriosity: closing in on ourselves and dismissing experiences and perceptions different from our own. And our paradigmatic calling as Jews is to emulate Avraham's curiosity, courage and sense of exploration in stretching himself beyond his own habituated thinking and points of reference, and opening to new possible ways of seeing the world.

Sadly, our current American Jewish Israel conversation bears more in common with the imperviousness of the flood and Babel generations than with the humility of Avraham.

But I am not at all here to castigate us for our evil ways. Because I believe we are not closed to each others' points of view because we are hubristic, vain or callous egotists. I believe we are closing to each others' points of view because we are anxious and scared.

Openness and curiosity are hard enough to put into practice when we're most at ease. When we're confident that what matters most to us is not at risk. When we're surrounded by those who agree with us and understand us – or at least are sincerely trying to.

When we are scared, anxious or threatened, curiosity and openness are usually the furthest things from our minds.

This is a time when many of us, on every side of the political spectrum, are scared and anxious. Scared for Israel's security and future. Scared that we may wake up one day to find Israel in grave danger if not risk of annihilation. Scared that there is so much at stake: not only our peoples' safety, but also our most strongly-held values and convictions. *And* what's more - our relationships with each other when we disagree about what will most serve those values. Scared that if we open our mouths and say the wrong thing we may be ostracized, labeled, or shut down. Scared that speaking will open us to being misunderstood or misconstrued, our nuances lost.

Our fears are well-founded. This is a terrifying time for all those who care about Israel. And in such a high-stakes, fraught political arena, it is also a scary time to *talk* about Israel, let alone be open to hearing others' views and humble about our own.

But it is now, when it is most terrifying, that we are called to be *bnei Avraham*, children of Abraham, to stretch past our scripts and certainties; to expose ourselves to perspectives on the other side of the river, wherever we stand; to open ourselves to being challenged, and even changed.

Because the closed, antagonistic, and avoidant ways we're communicating, understandable as they are, are destroying our people in the very moment we most need to be building our people up.

Our toxic or avoidant communication is leading to hurt, frustration, disconnection, fear, and loneliness.

We're draining energy from our most important and urgent communal priorities, including the challenges Israel confronts.

We're sacrificing the creative problem-solving that will only come from mining everyone's collective wisdom, rather than group think.

Finally, in my long list of why we *have* to do better, despite how hard it is: We're losing people. We're turning people off, particularly the next generation, who are standing at the gates of the Jewish community, looking inside and saying 'not for me.' This has been well-substantiated in multiple studies. Young Jews want **welcoming, inclusive settings** in which they can ask hard questions, be exposed to multiple perspectives, and **decide for themselves what they think**. In other words, they want to put into practice Avraham's spirit of exploration and curiosity. They're often not finding this spirit in Jewish institutions, and many are choosing the path of disengagement, not only from Israel, but from the Jewish community altogether.

What are costs to our community of falling prey to destructive patterns of communication around Israel? Many potential allies have been put off and stopped caring or engaging at all. Voices of innovation and nuance have been drowned out. We've all lost. We weaken rather than serve Israel and the Jewish people when we advance our points of view by attacking or avoiding our fellow Jews who see things differently than we do.

I've talked a bit about what's going wrong. I've touched on why it should matter to all of us.

Now let me say a word about how.

How to create a more a more vibrant, constructive Israel conversation is the work to which I've dedicated my life. Ideally, I wouldn't address the "how" through a lecture. This is the sort of thing that needs to be experienced to sink in. Words always fall short of the internal shifts that happen in us when, like Avraham, we are moved out of our comfort zones, when we push ourselves to overcome fear and anger,

and engage meaningfully across lines of difference. This afternoon we will walk through such a process together. For now I want to close by laying out one general principle.

Creating a healthier Israel conversation must be a *mitzvah aseh* rather than a *mitzvah sh'lo taaseh*; it must be a positive rather than a negative injunction. That is creating civil discourse on Israel is more about what we do, than what we refrain from doing. It's about pro-actively going after learning across political lines, not about holding back, masking honest disagreement, or being polite.

I say this because sometimes people think of civil discourse as synonymous with 'playing nice.' Then, they either claim they don't have a civility problem since they have no overt mudslinging, or get repelled by their associations of blandness and political impotence with the concept.

But generative disagreement is about much more than 'playing nice.' It is about probing our differences pro-actively in ways that they become a source of innovation and learning. Our differences – especially our most profound differences – are crucial signposts, signaling to us that there is something *essential* we have to learn as a community, something that needs to be deeply thought through and addressed with our greatest collective wisdom if we are ever going to learn its lessons. And what we need most is communal infrastructure and widespread communal training for leaning into those differences rather than avoiding or subduing them, let alone attacking one another in the face of them.

I hope my time with you will be part of that ongoing conversation toward building a more open, wise Jewish community connected across political lines.

Because in so doing, you will be exemplars of the spirit of *Avraham* inherited by us as *Ivrim*, the ones willing to do the jarring, challenging and critical work of opening with humility and curiosity to what lies on the other bank of the river, to what we don't yet understand, but may just be what we most need.

Nothing less than the Jewish people is at stake. Shabbat shalom.