

Shabbat 07 14 17 sermon

I love that Rabbi Jessica just channeled the word Shalom as our as our transition, as our connection to the to the message of the evening, to this weekend's Friday night message. Because I'm going to talk a little bit about Shalom, because after all I just came back from Israel. And coming back from Israel already throws you into a conversation about Shalom, about peace. And peace, whenever I hear the word peace I can't help but hear not only peace as the absence of conflict but also piece, P-I-E-C-E, the the sound of fragmentation and pieces whenever I hear peace, make peace. In fact there's even one Hasidic teacher that says ufros aleinu sukat shlamecha the word ufros, which means to spread over, is from the word frusa, which is a peace pieces of peace, fragments So I want to talk about peace tonight a little bit but also just to give you a sense of what it's like to be in Israel during July is. It's pretty amazing.

It's like there are so many groups that are there. There's Birthright and then there are funders and donors and those who receive. And those who went there are educators and there are trips from synagogues, there are fellowship programs. I mean all, everything was going on in July and then of course this year there was the Maccabee games which was amazing just to watch, you know, over 40 Jews playing ice hockey in the middle of Jerusalem was great you know.

I almost was like the backup goalie but that's a whole other story for that. But I said okay I'm going to learn. But I go every year, some of you know, to the Hartman Institute, the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. It's an amazing place. About 150 rabbis come for two weeks to study, to rejuvenate I say a bit, you know, tongue in cheek and a little bit risque please excuse me, but they come for textual healing. They get that feeling they need to go somewhere and they study text for 10 days. It's unbelievable and the theme this year was 1917, 1947, and 1967. 17, 47, 67. 17, 47, and 67.

Those dates are of course quite significant, right? 17 the date of the Balfour Declaration 1947 of course the League of Nations and all those who who actually made a partition plan. And then 67 of course. The Six Day War and what some people call the liberation of Judea and Samaria, or others will call the occupation of the West Bank. And so we really got ourselves into the thick and thin of the issue which of course is a very fragmented, very quarrelsome, conflicted issue. So it wasn't relaxing at all. It wasn't like a lot you know, I wasn't going to hang out and talking about big things and then on top of that of course the week before we got there the Supreme Court of Israel, the Netanyahu government suspended the building of an egalitarian prayer space. And then there was also a conversion bill that went through to make sure that the only conversions that were kosher in Israel would be those done by the ultra-orthodox rabbinic.

So you can imagine that pluralism and the limits of pluralism were on our minds like what do you do when people disagree vehemently? Vehemently disagree, vociferously disagree, violently disagree. When you have differences of opinion that are unbridgeable, there are no way to get through, and I was thinking about this the entire time I was there of course. And you know what happens when people give you legitimate understandings from different perspectives you walk out feeling wow they're all right or they're all wrong, right?

And you get confused. That's why the Talmud says there's no joy like the joy when you have your mind cleared of doubts because doubts can weigh on us. It's really crazy making who's right and maybe we don't even want to listen.

I'm sure this is not something that none of you have ever experienced, right? None of you have ever experienced not being sure if somebody else is right or wrong or coming into a disagreement and knowing that you were absolutely right. None of you have ever experienced that. It's only on geopolitical issues. It's an amazing thing to sit with somebody who thinks that you're crazy.

On various nights in the Institute we had a group of settlers, those who are living in the West Bank, and the next thing we had a group of very left-wing political advocates and part of the government. It was hard to get them on the same stage so I wound up thinking to myself, I wonder how it is that we go about making peace out of pieces. What is the true essence of Shalom, we just chanted it, Shalom. And maybe I asked the Torah, I said Torah can you give me some insight? I want to walk out of here tonight with some advice because the Torah is always in my way of relating to Torah, always a place where I go for good advice; how to lead a better life; and how to lead a life of fewer regrets with more wisdom and more insight and more spiritual connection.

So I want the Torah to speak to that and guess what, tomorrow morning it does. But you have to search because at first glance tomorrow morning's Torah reading would be anything but a place to look for peace. Tomorrow morning's reading is Parshat Pinchas, the Torah portion named for a zealot, a Baruch Goldstein as it were. But in the Torah, the Torah actually gives him its imprimatur, it says what you did Pinchas was great. People might not remember what happened to Pinchas, Pinchas in last week's Torah portion saw two people, one named Cosby Batsur, the other one Zimri Ben Salu, two people having a sexual relationship in an inappropriate place. And the Torah tells us at that moment last week in a place called Beit Taor that this zealot named Pinchas or Phinehas took a spear and as a vigilante he stood up and he did what he thought was right.

Unless you think for a moment that the Torah was going to come along and say how dare you, the Torah in tomorrow morning's reading will open up with a blessing from God, Pinchas Ben Al-Azhar, Ben Aharon HaKohen. He says, wow, Pinchas, you did the right thing. The Torah says, God says in the name of Phinehas, who was a zealot for the sake of the divine, someone who acted impulsively but yet correctly, God says way to go Phinehas. Way to go Pinchas. And not only does God say great, God also says I will give you a covenant, a covenant of Shalom.

But something's up in Dodge everybody because in the word Shalom we have one of only two instances in the Torah where the letter in the word is split in half. The letter in the word Shalom, the Vav, the third letter of Shalom is split in half, it's a Vav Kitia in the actual Torah. The Vav of the Om, O, the vowel O is split in half and you can orthographically see it when you'll read the Torah tomorrow, you'll see a Vav that's cut in the middle this didn't escape of course the Rabbis of old and they said something's going on here this blessing that God gave of Shalom to this zealot is not complete.

And one great Hasidic master whose Torah is always quoted this Shabbos, Mordechai Yosef Lehner of Ishbets, the town of Ishbets said anyone that says the Torah would have named an entire Parsha after a crazy zealot who sinned is making a mistake. He says he made a mistake, he made a mistake but he shouldn't be blamed. He should not have killed those people but he still got a broken Shalom. And then he goes on to say something radical for all of us that to me is the good advice this Shabbat, so listen up here because it blew me out of the water. He says where was Moshe when all of this happened?

If you look back at last week's Parsha Moses was on the scene, but Moses doesn't act. And in some rabbinic readings that see Pinchas as a great model of behavior Moshe's inaction is corrected by Pinchas' absolute action. It's his impulsivity, but his knowingness, his intuitiveness, he takes action where Moses won't. But says the Ishbets Rebbe, no that's not it. Moses knew something. Moses could see the whole picture. Moses knew that those two people had their own destiny. He had his own inner knowing. Moses thought to himself you know they're not wrong, they're right, and so he didn't act. Moses thought they are right not wrong and so he didn't act.

I was sitting with a friend of mine named Micha Goodman—he's a philosopher in Israel—he just came out with a book called Catch 67. Catch 67 it's a book that purports to give a really well analyzed view of what happened in the 67 conflict. What are the different schools of thought around 67 occupation liberation, and it offers a really tight reading of each of the camps. Each of the parties each of those who were involved: Palestinians, Israeli settlers, liberal left right-wing, all of them. And the Prime Minister of Israel Ehud Barak wrote an editorial critical of my friend Micha's book, which is now a bestseller.

And so Micha wrote his own response to Ehud Barak what was the essence of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's critique of Micha. He said Micha when you understood the conflict you gave too much credit to this particular security issue. There's no real security issue. I'm not gonna go into the arguments, but essentially he said you're giving too much weight to what really isn't a problem. And my friend Micha said to him, you know you might say and the experts might say it's not a problem, but if you ask the people who are scared, it's a real problem. And he did that for each of the positions.

And when I sat with him for lunch I said to Micha what was your methodology for understanding the conflict? He said it's very simple. I'm a philosopher, and when I went to school the first thing they taught us to do whenever somebody told us a theory was how is the theory wrong. If you want to be an academic the first thing you think is how is the theory wrong? And he said I want to do something completely different this time. I wanted to listen to each one of the sides and ask one simple question, how is it right for a moment? How is it right for a moment, because brilliant people can't be completely wrong. What animates them must have some credence. There must be something there, and if we are gonna find a way to peace he said we have to piece it together by inhabiting the other person and asking ourselves for a moment how are they right for a moment. How are they right for a moment?

Can you imagine what our life would look like if inside each and every conversation we had with people we said to them how are you right for a moment? How are you right for a

moment? But often when we go into conversations especially with people we don't agree with not saying anything about spouses or anything like that. I'm not talking about anything internal like the real world that we experience day to day. Our mindset is usually the person doesn't really want something and we better prove to them how they're wrong. That will motivate them. Can't you see I'm right?

I was reading a book in Israel about how to work with children who are difficult because I really want to know how to work with myself. And the book said often when we have theories of behavior they are rooted in one fundamental, like a supposition. If they wanted to they would. If they wanted to they would and so if they're not what's the problem? They don't want to. Is that clear? Let's do that again. If they wanted to they would, and if they are not it means they don't want to. And it's brilliant psychology said no it's not like that, at least not in his experience. He said usually it's more like if they can they will and if they're not they couldn't. If they can they will and if they're not they couldn't. They couldn't see your position. They can't understand, they don't have enough information. And this difference of opinion between human nature are people fundamentally needing to be goaded, whipped, convinced, persuaded, or whether or not if they can they will. Can they be right for a moment? Can we let them be right for a moment and enter into their reality and see through their eyes for a moment?

This was Micha's argument. That if I took all of the five places and really entered them, then I'd find a way out. And he quoted Menachem of Breslev, one of the great Hasidic masters whose story is a story that I live by. A story known as the turkey prince. Some of you might know this story. There once was a prince who thought he was a turkey. He took off all his clothing, started what is it cock-a-doodle-doo? He started clucking and gobbling and went underneath a table, and all the wise men came to try to figure out how to get the turkey prince out from underneath the table. Your your highness you're crazy don't you know you are the prince of a great majestic country? Gobble gobble gobble gobble gobble. Your highness, it's completely irrational. Let me show you in the mirror you are a human being. Gobble gobble gobble gobble gobble. It's a one great khama great sage said your majesty. I can help your son. He came into the room and began to disrobe, whereupon the king said are you crazy? Is there a method to your madness? He took off all of his clothing, he got underneath the table with the prince, and started to gobble gobble gobble. Said he's right for a moment. He's right for a moment. He got inside of the turkey prince's head and slowly they began to work their way through. He got to see life through the eyes of someone who thinks the world is made up of turkeys. He said a turkey can also wear pants; a turkey can also sit up straight. A turkey.

What would our world look like, what would this community look like, what would this New York City community this nation look like if for a moment we could imagine ourselves standing in front of someone we disagree with violently and living their reality for one minute? For a moment. Let them be right for a moment. Maybe it's too late for that. Maybe that ship passed. Maybe we're in the aftermath of a world where we didn't do it and now we have to think about it differently. But in this community amongst yourselves with your loved ones, with your children here, what would it be like to let someone be right for a moment and start to live in their shoes? To see through their eyes? To think about peace as a broken valve with those two little pieces of the valve, each of them are saying without

relationship without that ability to take the place of the other. There can't be fuller Schlemmut peace we can't find our way out unless we go through so on the Shabbat Shabbat where Shalom is so broken. I love Moshe who said you know what it could be that those two people were right and so I want to lift up that moment, and I'm gonna lift it up for each and every one of us to take out tonight, tomorrow this week try it on. Try on that intention when you're sitting with someone you disagree with try for a moment to say maybe they are right for a moment just see how it goes and then let me know. I'm so curious to see if it works. I think it's good advice in the Torah.

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