

Standing Upright

RDI 052926 Sermon

Yesterday there was a press conference at the NYPD headquarters. As many of you know, the Israeli Day Parade is this Sunday, and a reporter asked Mayor Mamdani and his administration, would they be sending a representative to the parade? And the NYPD Commissioner, Jessica Tisch, pointed to herself, stepped forward to the microphone, raised her own hand and said, the mayor will not be attending, but I will be attending the march proudly. Those two words.

I want to come back to that. The march. Proudly.

Because the mayor of New York City, as we know, will not be there on Sunday, and I need to say something clearly, because the Torah asks us to be honest before it asks us to be generous. This is the first mayor in the history of New York City, the home to the largest Jewish diasporic community in the world, it's the first time a mayor of this city refused to attend this parade. And his refusal is not rooted in opposition to a particular Israeli government policy, or a particular government official, it is rooted in his opposition to the very establishment of Israel as a Jewish homeland, as a Jewish state in 1948.

His opposition is to the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in their own ancestral homeland. It's not criticism. Criticism, we hear a lot of that.

Open up any social media feed and you'll see it, from within the Knesset, from Israelis, this is not that, this is de-legitimization, and it deserves to be named as such. Two weeks ago, many of you know this, that he posted a video on Nakba Day, telling only one side of a story that we all know has two sides. And on that same day, we learned that there was a planned attack in New York City at a synagogue, and it had been thwarted.

And words have consequences. And words that we don't say have consequences. Distorted narratives have consequences.

From Bondi Beach to Boulder to Washington, D.C., we are watching the consequences of speech and non-speech play out in Jewish blood. And there is a much subtler version of this problem, though, and one that lives very close to home. There's a version of Jewish public life right now, maybe you heard it this week, if you listened to Yuval Harari's conversation on Ezra Klein's podcast, where the price of admission to the conversation is performing your distance from your own people.

It goes something like this, I'm not one of those Zionists. I can see what we've become. It sounds like courage.

I think it's a crouch. I think it's a crouch dressed up as moral clarity. And it gives permission to a world that needs no permission to hold us in suspicion.

And so I just felt all of that needs to be said. And now I want to talk about something much deeper. I want to talk about posture, about a particular posture, because I mentioned crouching.

Because the Torah has something to say about posture this Shabbos, and it says it in the very first word that is lifted up, as it were, in this parasha. The name of this parasha is naso. Naso means to lift up.

And often, of course, it's associated with a census. But the literal meaning of it is Nasod, Rosh, B'nai, Gershon, lift up the heads of the children of Gershon. The word to count, lispor, is not mentioned.

It's not a tally. It means to lift them up. And it says Gamheim, them too.

Lifting up the children of Gershon, them too. Before God gives the assignment to the Levites, before they carry the Mishkan, before there is the priestly blessing, which will come later on in the portion, before any of that happens, God says, stand upright. Lift yourself up.

Lift your head. Stand tall. I want you to hear what that means.

Because there's a crazy Hasidic Torah from the Ishmetzer Rebbe. All of his Torah might be crazy, but this particular one, he says, there's extraordinary precision in what he reads into this moment in the parasha. He says that the children of Gershon, next on is the children of Gehat, there's a group of Levites who only were elevated, they only achieved their elevation, their ability to lift up their heads, by developing patience to enter into situations of doubt and uncertainty and remain upright inside of them.

The Ishmetzer Rebbe says that here where the Torah comes to the Levites, and he reads a particular clan of the Levites as a group that were uniquely charged to enter into safek, into doubt, into uncertainty, to stand upright within uncertainty, within things that are moving, and to still find a way to stay in integrity. The elevation was not from certainty. It wasn't because they had all the answers, it wasn't because they won the arguments.

It was a capacity to stand in a place where the ground beneath you is unstable, and where the world is pressing down on you, where people you thought were allies are performing their distance from you, and still not to crouch, to remain upright. To be not so is not to be right. You're not lifted up because you're right, but upright.

Because you have inner integrity, you have a light that should shine, that it doesn't require any defense preemptively. Your light is your light. And it's a deep Torah for this moment.

There's a profound difference between thinking that you have to crouch in order to be standing upright, and owning that you can stand upright. I have to be right to stand upright. And we've been crouching for a very long time.

The Jewish people, there's a blip of our story that has been this century. It's a blip. It's infinitesimal to what we experienced for 2,000 years.

We should have rachmanus on ourselves. Let's have some compassion for ourselves. After all, it's only recently that we could stand upright in some way.

For most of the time, we were crouching. And I say that as an observation. I'm not trying to accuse anyone.

And a posture of defense, having to explain yourself, or justify yourself, or justify your state, or contextualize your grief, or apologize for your existence before the conversation can even begin, that posture has become so habitual for us as Jews that many of us don't even notice when we're doing it. You know those apps now where you can put this thing on the back to correct your posture? It's something I was like, maybe they're only advertising to me because maybe I'm crouch, chief operating crouch officer or something. They put, you know, you can get like a thing, it gives you a zets if you're like, you know, like this, you're like this, it goes zets, and you stand up.

All these contraptions for upright standing. I don't know if any chiropractor or any other one, you know, approves of them or if they work. It could make things much worse.

But like, if you're used to being a particular way of walking in the world, if you ever did Alexander technique or Feldenkrais, if you did any body work in your life, you know that the body takes a long time to rewire itself. Before you know it, your chin is jutting, and you're shirking, and you don't notice it. So there's no judgment.

It's habitual. But tonight, this Shabbos, this historic Shabbos, for the Jews here in New York City, and I would argue for Jews around the world, the Torah says, before this parade, march proudly. March proudly.

Lift your head. So what does that look like? Practically, spiritually, to lift our heads up? I want to give you three things. Three things.

The first one is that lifting the head is not the same thing as raising a fist. Naso is not aggression. It's not defiance.

It's not puffed up. It's not the posture of a person that is spoiling or looking for a fight. It's the posture of a person who knows who they are and doesn't need the world's permission to be that, to stand in that light.

So that's Naso. That's upright. Lifting your head is not the same as raising your fist.

We all know that there's a difference between pride and provocation. The Torah is asking us this Shabbos for pride. Quiet, grounded, unashamed pride.

The kind that walks down Fifth Avenue on Sunday without an apology and also without rage. Two. To lift our heads upright means refusing to lead any conversation with a qualification or a justification.

We've been so trained to begin every sentence about Israel with a caveat. I don't support everything the government does, but does anybody say that about America? Or about any other country in the world? Really? I don't believe you. I don't believe you, Judy.

I'm in too many of those conversations and if you do it, then okay, we have a lot to talk about. Beginning a conversation with as a Jew X or as a liberal Zionist is another one. Listen, as a liberal Zionist, we're already in the conversation on our back foot saying, let me first apologize so you know that I'm not like those Jews or that Zionist or that group.

Which doesn't mean, of course, that in the context of the conversation, you're more than welcome to surface things that you don't like. And you should. There are plenty of things about Israel that are far from perfect.

Far from perfect. Why do I have to say that? So the second lifting of the head this Shabbos, you don't have to apologize. You don't have to apologize.

You don't have to make a caveat at the beginning of every sentence. The qualification has swallowed the conviction the minute you've made it. We don't have to stop thinking critically.

We are obviously a community that thinks critically. I have deep questions and real grief about the decisions that have been made over the last two years and before that as well, but there's a difference between a person who thinks critically from a posture of pride and one who comes from a posture of crouching. One who leads with crouching is apologizing and abdicating.

One is honest and the other, I think, is a response to trauma. And the last one, the last of the three ways to lift up and why it matters. This one, I want you really to hear this one.

It comes from the depths of my heart in this moment. Because if you follow the Parsha after the introduction to the Levites, it will eventually arrive at a moment called Birchat Koanim, the priestly blessing. After the Levites are told to lift their heads and to show up for duty, after the Mishkan has been assigned to each of them, after all the logistics and the tribal offerings have been given, the Torah will arrive at 15 words.

Arrayed in a group of three, five, and seven, that have become immortal. Yevarechecha Adonai v'yishmerecha, may God bless you and watch over you, protect you, guard you, be vigilant. Ya'ir Adonai panayvilecha v'yichunecha, may God illuminate to you the way.

With God's face. And may you feel graced by that face. And Yissa Adonai panayvilecha v'yaseym lecha shalom, may God then, Yissa, lift up God's face to you and give you shlemut, shalom, peace.

These three lines, 15 words, with its last phrase, Yissa Adonai panayv, lift up your face, God. God lifts God's face. With the same lifting up, the same root as the naso, lift the heads.

And so there's a sequence. Lift up your head, God says, first. So that I can see your face.

And when I see your face, then I'll show you mine. If you lift your head, I will show you my face. To receive blessing from the Divine is difficult when we're looking down.

It's difficult to receive a blessing that is waiting for us when we're crouching. It's very hard to receive a blessing in the midst of an apology for something that is about who you are and not what was done. It is difficult to feel God's shining towards us when we're scanning the room for who might disapprove of who I am and my very existence.

God lifts God's face towards us but we have to be looking up in order to see it. So here's what I want us to leave with tonight. Two invitations.

One for this Sunday and one for right now. For Sunday, if you're going to go to the parade, and I hope that you will, even if you don't have a ticket, that you will show up on 5th Avenue and celebrate Israel. Celebrate the miracle of that small place where anybody and everybody who criticizes it at this moment would rather live there than in any other place in the Middle East.

It's a fact. Celebrate a place where my gay nephew can go to a hundred gay bars in Tel Aviv and find his bashert. Celebrate a place that innovates a multi-ethnic, multicultural space that is under siege and trying its best.

Celebrate a place that has been our homeland, the first return to our indigenous place in over 2,000 years, the miracle of Israel. Don't show up with anger but with pride. With a quiet, unhurried dignity of a people who have been walking for a very long time and intend to keep on walking.

Celebrate a Muslim organization which will be walking alongside us for the very first time. A Muslim organization will be walking with us in the parade because they decided to lift their heads too. And it's not about politics for them, I guarantee you.

It's about something bigger. That is one face turning to another. That is Birkat Koanim in the street.

And for tonight, a little doggyback, a little homework. I want to ask you something much smaller which is to think about where in your life you know you crouch. Think about someplace in your life where you know ahead of time in a relationship, in a friendship, at work, where you begin with a qualification about something that you are.

About some way that you show up in the world, about a certain habit you have. Something about you that if you were in the presence of someone else who loved you and knew you unconditionally, you wouldn't just be crouching, you wouldn't be crouching, you'd be proud. You would be celebrated.

Someone would look at that and say, wow, that little light of mine, I'm going to let that shine. Lift up your head. Lift up the posture that is a posture that is proud and not defensive.

Become aware of the ways in which your habitual way in the world, the automatic response is to get smaller as opposed to standing in who you are. The Torah tells us this weekend, and then in 15 words God will lift up God's face towards you. Lift your head.

March proudly. And receive the blessing.

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Bit's and pieces:

This is a world in which the mayor of New York City, the home to the largest Jewish diasporic community in the world, refused to attend the Israel Day Parade. His refusal was not rooted in opposition to a particular Israeli government policy. It was rooted in his opposition to the very establishment of Israel as a Jewish homeland in 1948 – to the right of

the Jewish people to self-determination in their own ancestral homeland. This is de-legitimization, and it deserves to be named as such.

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