

Rabbi Jonathan Roos

Shabbat Chayei Sarah 5784 – November 10, 2023

On the Ambivalence of Marching Together

STANDING on the parted shores of history we still believe what we were taught before ever we stood at Sinai's foot; that wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt; that there is a better place, a promised land; that the winding way to that promise passes through the wilderness. That there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching together.¹

Sometimes the circumstances of life recast the words of a prayer for us in ways that almost literally give them physical embodiment. And like bodies in the material world, once something takes physical form, it's subject to the laws of gravity and the limitations of all matter. No longer ideal, the words must negotiate this mess that is our natural habitat.

There is a March on the Mall in DC this coming Tuesday that is being called a march to stand with Israel, a march to free the hostages, and a march against antisemitism. Its organizers hope the turnout will be massive at a level that befits this historical moment and matches previous historical Jewish marches like the March for Soviet Jews in the last 1980s. When this march was announced this week, it became immediately clear that some in the Jewish community were unequivocally joining and others were absolutely not. It also became clear – at least around here – that some people and organizations had mixed

feelings. Many of you and others have been trying to decide all week if they should come and march together with the expected crowd. This is the group – the mixed feelers - for whom I wrote this sermon. Many within this group are concerned that there is no official list of speakers yet and they worry that perhaps the rally will be too much war mongering or too little compassion for innocent civilians.

I believe, however, that the mixed feelings are grounded on three deeper issues. These are difficult matters that may not be obvious or clear even to those very people who feel ambivalence. It's also true that many people would hesitate to admit these feelings, especially at times like this, because they are controversial and may elicit strong reactions from friends and peers. But let us not ignore, nor fail to plumb, the depths of our feelings so as not to confront – and perhaps resolve – the individual disquiet that nags us with the sense that perhaps we are being untrue to ourselves or the collective angst that hints at a historical Jewish schism too broad to bear.

Mixed feelings about the March – I believe - are threefold:

1. One has to do with the struggle for Palestinian sovereignty and is often focused on the Occupation. This leads some to ask: how can I stand in solidarity with Israel on Tuesday when I believe that Israeli policies are at least partly to blame for leading Palestinians to such despair that they turn to armed resistance?
2. Another concern is for the high level of civilian casualties and humanitarian conditions in Gaza. This concern leads

one to ask: how can I stand in solidarity with Israel if can't countenance the civilian deaths and suffering in Gaza? These two concerns may or may not be connected. It's possible to have either concern without the other. Or to have both.

3. The third concern is the grundnorm of all the others. There is, I believe, among Jews, particularly those of us who identify as liberal, something even deeper. I believe there is a certain amount of ambivalence about the legitimacy of the State of Israel itself that lingers because its founding is historically speaking still so recent.

This last point is where I am going to focus. This discussion is going to be especially hard to hear and almost impossible to discuss amicably. We – the Jewish community - have avoided it so far – and I don't mean for just past weeks but for 75 years. Such avoidance has been pragmatically possible throughout Israel's history – most wars were fought against standing armies of sovereign nations and, as bad as terrorist threats or actions ever became, they never presented an existential threat like October 7th. That massacre and this Gaza War have made such avoidance no longer possible. Our ability to march unequivocally on Tuesday is just the tip of the iceberg so to speak. There are a fundamental questions about Jewish identity, community and collective life that are embedded in the debates and discussions of today.

A few weeks ago I was preparing for a b'nai mitzvah and walking the student through the service plans and around the bima. He asked about the display of candles over here [the hostage vigil of 242 candles on our bima] and I explained what it was and that we would offer a prayer before the service for the release of the hostages. And with barely a pause he asked, gently and truly curious, I think: "But didn't we steal their land first?"

This is the fundamental ambivalence that I think many liberal Jews feel – not just 13 year olds, but 33, 43 and 83 year olds, and it has become manifest in these weeks unavoidably.

You might well conclude that Hamas is evil and the world would be better with its elimination and yet still find it hard, if not impossible, to fully support Israeli military force. Because if, as that student's question implied, you are bedeviled to this day over the fact that Israel's legal incorporation as a sovereign state was founded on – or at least in consonance with - the immoral appropriation of other people's land, you have a fundamental ambivalence about Zion that could use some resolution before you can feel unequivocal in Marching on Tuesday.

Now, I am going to try to make the case against that basic ambivalence. But first, I have to acknowledge the truth at its core. There are families – Arabs, Palestinians, non-Jews – who still have documents and physical evidence of their families' former ownership of property across Israel that is now legally owned and inhabited by other people – Jews mostly – who took possession not through a freely agreed upon and documented

sale and transfer with those families. They gained these homes through the unwanted loss of that property on one side and its acquisition by the other through the twisting dynamics and ultimate outcomes of human migration and boundary revisions that result from wartime. On the level of a purely empathetic, humanitarian outlook – of one human soul to another – that’s not fair. But, that is not – and never has been in human history - how the world works. I can imagine that some people – maybe a lot – will be quite upset with me for saying this. I want to try to be sure, however, that I’m speaking with the utmost intellectual rigor and yet still not sacrificing the compassion that Judaism holds dear and I personally rely on to make it through each day. I don’t mean to convey a celebration or a justification of the outcomes. So let me turn to a scholar and his work on this topic.

In his book *Just and Unjust Wars*, Michael Walzer, explains it like this, first by speaking of individuals:

A person has certain rights in their home even if they do not own it because neither their life nor their liberty is secure unless there exists some physical space within which a person is safe from intrusion. So for example, an unhoused person sleeping in a cardboard box under a freeway has the same right to not be murdered in his evening slumber that I have while asleep in my bed, locked inside a house for which I have the deed and title registered with the county clerk. Similarly, the rights of a nation or people – like Israel - not to be invaded – as they were on Simchat torah - derives from the common life that

its members have made on their piece of land and not just from the legal title they hold or don't hold.

If we limit ourselves only to the archaeological evidence and not to biblical narrative or folklore, then we can say with certainty that Jews were living in the land that we today call Israel from at least 825 BCE – almost 3,000 years ago. We know this from an object in the British Museum called “The Black Obelisk” that depicts the vassal agreement of King Jehu son of Omri, Tenth King of Israel, to an Assyrian King.

Jumping back to today for a moment, we, in our attention and concern for the geopolitical challenges of Jewish statehood and power, we have, I believe, amplified the role of military action, occupation, and politics in the life of the Jewish people in Israel over the daily experience and lived reality of the Jewish people who live there. So let's re-center that experience – individual and collective Jewish life.

In Walzer's words: “The moral standing of any particular state depends upon the reality of the common life it protects.”ⁱⁱ

“It is the coming together of a people that establishes the integrity of a territory. And what is at stake is not only the lives of individuals but also the common life that they have made. It is for the sake of this common life that we assign a certain presumptive value to the boundaries that mark off a people's territory and to the state that defends it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So, for at least 3,000 years, Jewish people have dwelled individually and gathered collectively in the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Whatever else they did, those Jews were driven by the same impulses and desires as any human civilization in history: not to devour the lives of the other inhabitants of the same land, but to foster in safety and continuity, a collective life that involves for example, observing the sabbath on Friday night, a time that nobody else in the world considered a holy time; along with the right to not eat bacon double cheeseburgers despite the fact that everyone else thinks that particular dish is a gift from God. That's slightly facetious but not really. Shabbos and kashruth are essentials of Jewish private and collective life since those ancient days.

Over time, the ruling authorities of the land – which is to say the legally titled owners – came and went. Mostly Jews made their individual and collective life – making Shabbos and not eating bacon double cheeseburgers – through all the changes – Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Turks, Christians, Ottomans, and British. There were very brief periods of Jewish sovereignty legally speaking (like the Maccabees). But the essential morality of their right to live there, grew with the contiguous collective life that they unfolded in that land from 835 BCE to October 7th this year.

When my student asked: if 242 people were abducted because first we stole the land of the hostage takers, what he meant – and I think the question that is still unformed perhaps in the vocal folds of our innermost soul, is whether perhaps Israelis

are in this situation because Jewish people continue to insist on holding and defending land that everyone knows is not rightfully theirs?

The answer is no. On October 6th there existed a peace that allowed the individuals on one side of the Gaza border to enjoy their right to be alive and to make a life according to their ways as Jews have done in that space as both legal owners and as colonized subjects: making shabbos, not eating bacon cheeseburgers, but also not checking their phones while dancing with scrolls on the holiday, or dancing with hallucinatory revel at an all-night rave in desert. There was likewise peace on October 6th in Gaza, even with a blockade and serious grievances yet to be addressed, but peace existed such that a mother could take her children to the beach or to school, receive medical treatment, and live Muslim religious observance like her neighbors. The shattering of that peace was a crime. And it's continued disruption is too. The shattering of that peace however brought not just war. It revealed to us, the essence of what territorial integrity, the right to life, and cultural if not political sovereignty are worth.

We are in the situation for the same lessons and principle that we were "taught before ever we stood at Sinai's foot; that wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt; and since the prayer doesn't explain what that means – I think these days we are living through explain "eternally Egypt" well enough. It is eternally true that wherever we go, it doesn't matter if you own the land or you are a subject on the land, of if you occupy the

land without final resolution of its status. That wherever you go, you have a right individually and collectively to be alive and stay alive and a right to build a collective life – even one that puts the Sabbath on a night nobody else accepts and a diet that keeps you from eating the food your neighbors love. And eternally, people and other forces will challenge you to defend that right. And in so doing, they force you to discern if you think the sacrifices required to protect both the individual and the collective life are worth paying.

Ambivalence is a natural feelings for the truth is a composition of infinite points. But this – individually and collectively Jewish – is, I believe worth it. Unequivocally.

There is a better place, a promised land; and the winding way to that promise passes through the wilderness. And there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching together.

Shabbat shalom.

ⁱ Zecher, Rabbi Elaine. Mishkan T'filah for the House of Mourning (p. 10b). CCAR Press. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Walzer, p. 54

ⁱⁱⁱ Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars, 5th edition, p. 57