

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel  
Ari Gant Bar Mitzvah  
Shabbat Shoftim  
September 7, 2024

Our Micah custom for many years is for the bar\bat mitzvah student to pose a question to the rabbi whose response is offered on the morning of their bnai mitzvah service.

Dear Ari,

At our very first meeting, many months ago, I asked rather casually if you had, as yet, given any thought to the question you wished to pose for the morning. Your immediately reply:

“Why do so many people hate Jews?” You want to understand antisemitism.

We all do.

Antisemitism Ari, is as old as western civilization. No brief remarks, no long remarks for that matter, could ever capture this subject in its entirety. If you ever feel like you are in too good a mood, try googling antisemitism. As a kind of game, I did that after I had completed the final draft of the sermon. I froze. The pages go on and on. I linked to too many. Page after page, I stopped counting at twenty-nine but I forced myself to open a link on each page—definitions of antisemitism, history of antisemitism, examples of antisemitism, pages of pure antisemitism. It is a world gone mad.

This morning, Ari, I wish to simply comment on what we are experiencing around us today. History will have to wait for another time.

Much to my great sadness and horror, Ari, we have entered an age of tribal intolerance.

An ethnic religious tribe on the far right.

A moral\philosophical tribe on the far left.

Both tribes embrace and flirt with antisemitism. The degree may vary but it is there-unmistakably.

The Far Right is anchored by an extreme White Christian Nationalist vision for this country. They hold that America is a nation state of and primarily for White Christians, that there is such thing as a correct American culture, with English as its language, a particular kind of Christianity as its religious ethos and its own concept of family, heterosexual, with naturally conceived children.

In this mind set

the creative arts must be controlled,

history has to be taught in their defined way,

the civil war was a great lost cause,

library shelves have to be monitored because the wrong books influence the reader with unacceptable ideas or behaviors,

immigrants are invaders (especially if you have non-white skin),

and

Jews are outsiders and threats—look at how we control the banks, Hollywood, and the media. We are communist agitators, global cosmopolitans, internationalists, decadent artists, union organizers, New York intellectuals and with our dual loyalty we sway foreign policy.

You will not hear this from every politician of a certain persuasion—you will simply hear, Ari that “there are very fine people on both sides.” Ari, when you see voter suppression, book banning, and censorship, —you are seeing the tip of the iceberg—a White Christian Nationalism is anchoring the root.

In a nut shell Ari, far right, authoritarian, anti-liberal democracies always fear a free mind—

As Librarian of Congress in celebration of America’s bi-centennial, Archibald Macleish wrote these words:

“there is not a single police state of any ideology which does not confess by its Berlin Walls (think here border wall) ...its nets of concentration camps (think here the camps and tent cities that were built at the Texas border under a previous president), ... its censorship of books (think here book banning in too many places), ...its suppression of minds (think here the Florida school curriculum) , that it is afraid... Wars it can win for a time...But the free man, the free mind, it cannot conquer...”

If our Judaism, Ari, stands for anything, it is a free mind that seeks to explore everything from the human soul to the outer reaches of the galaxy—Sigmund Freud to Albert Einstein—Philip Roth to Leonard Bernstein. This is who we are.

The far Left is also a tribe.

Where do we see it?

What was happening on some college campuses earlier this year? What transpired that went beyond protesting Israel’s method of war in Gaza?

What motivates such calls as:

“Palestine will be free from the river to the sea.”

“Global Intifada”

And even as seen on the campus of George Washington University, “Final Solution.”

The far left seems to hold a moral philosophy based on the absolute ethical correctness of what they term “the oppressed.” In terms of Israel-Palestine, Ari, the thinking of the far left is, to my mind, shaped and informed by what I call a fictive narrative—an idea to which I will return.

This is a different kind of tribalism. Those on the radical left are unable to distinguish between Israel as a nation-state that pursues policies they and too frequently I also abhor

and

Zionism as the idea that the Jewish people have the right to self-determination in a nation-state. This group chooses to either ignore a liberal Zionist such as myself who has advocated for a radically different Israel than the current one, believes fiercely and unrelentingly in the right of a Jewish state to exist as well as the total right for a Palestinian state to exist side by side with Israel. Liberal Zionists advocate for this ceaselessly.

The progressive anti-Zionist denies the right of Jewish self-determination. They do not deny the right of French, English, Danish, Portuguese, Latvian, Lithuanian—this list is nearly endless—self-determination. This denial is reserved for Jews. In this regard Ari, it tips over for me into antisemitism. Judging Jews differently than others is a classic definition of antisemitism.

As I said, there are those on the far left who have created what I consider the fiction of Israel as a form of settler colonialism. They choose to ignore or overlook the historic Jewish experience in both Europe and the Arab lands of the Middle East.

As an example, you can read the accounts of European countries thru the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century plastered with signs “Jews out of Europe.” Amos Oz in his auto-biography writes of father who left the signs of Europe saying “Jews get out”-written in Russian, Polish and German-only to encounter the same signs in Palestine—written now in Arabic. We were victims of colonial rule and then refugees from it.

The tragedy of Israel-Palestine is that there are two indigenous people rooted in that land who have not yet learned to share it in peace.

Ari, I have yet to see a good rebuttal to Amos Oz’s great defense of political Zionism:

“I would be more than happy to live in a world composed of dozens of civilizations, each developing in accordance with its own internal rhythm... without any one emerging as a nation-state: no flag, no emblem, no passport, no anthem... Only spiritual civilizations ...without the tools of statehood...

But the Jewish people has already staged a long running one-man show of that sort. The international audience sometimes applauded, sometimes threw stones, and occasionally slaughtered the actor. No one joined us; no one copied the model the Jews were forced to sustain for two thousand years, the model of a civilization without the “tools of statehood.” For me this drama ended with the murder of Europe’s Jews by Hitler.

I am forced to take it upon myself to play the “game of nations,” with all the tools of statehood, even though it causes me to feel (as George Steiner put it) like an old man in a kindergarten. To play the game with an emblem, and a flag and a passport and an army, and even war, **provided that such war is an absolute existential necessity.** I accept those rules of the game because existence without the tools of statehood is a matter of mortal danger...” (Amos Oz, *In the Land of Israel*, 1983)

One final thought- Years ago, my high school band played the music from SOUTH PACIFIC. There is one song that stayed with me to this day: You’ve Got to Be Taught Whom to Hate.” I think that is correct—you do have to be taught. Antisemitism is the perpetuation of a totally irrational hatred that is rooted in lies. Emotions rooted in lies are not easily overcome.

Hate is taught but it feeds on the darkness of ignorance and fear that turns difference into “other” and “other” into enemy or danger.

We have to oppose that kind of thinking, teaching, myth making, and stereotyping with every fiber of our being. Antisemitism leads to social upheaval and worse.

This is why I believe so firmly in the promise of Enlightenment liberalism.

Ari—last words here--

Liberalism—the underpinning of liberal democracy, includes the following incomplete list:

A core commitment to human equality and human rights for all people

A commitment to public education for all

A commitment to tolerance and respect for difference

A commitment to norms of civility

A commitment to public safety for all

These values are enshrined in the Torah you read and held. Your portion is SHOFTIM—JUSTICE our greatest Jewish pursuit—a just society of equality for all. Justice Justice—you shall pursue— Justice attained by means of injustice is no justice at all.

Take that message to heart—

Learn it,

Live it.

Teach it to others—

Let that be a lasting bar mitzvah gift.

Shabbat shalom—

Your friend always,

Rabbi Zemel

As I invite you now to the *bimah* with your parents for a special blessing.