

Mishpatim 5785 Sermon
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For more than 500 days, Jewish people across the world continue to recite the blessing: Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Haolam, Matir Assurim - Blessed are You, ruler of the universe, who frees the captive. Our people have been overjoyed to witness the release of living hostages, in which our tradition tells us to say, “Baruch hatov v’hameitiv!” – “Blessed is the One Who is good and Who does good!” Unfortunately, the joy of witnessing these miracles has been shattered by the announcement that Shiri, Kfir and Ariel Bibas, a mom and her two young children, and Oded Lifshitz were murdered by Hamas, and their bodies will be returned to Israel next week. Yarden, the husband and father of the Bibas family, was also captured on October 7th, and he was released alive a few weeks ago. Our cloud of despair has grown darker, and anger and sorrow rains on us every moment of every day.

Our Torah teachings each week are quite timely. Mishpatim, our Torah portion this Shabbat, states laws and ramifications of breaking certain laws the Jewish people must uphold. Two of the laws found in our Torah this Shabbat are “One who strikes one’s father or mother shall be put to death. One who kidnaps another party - whether having sold or still holding the victim - shall be put to death.” The MeKhilta DeRabbi Yishmael, a midrashic text, notes that kidnapping an individual is an act of stealing one’s soul. Our Torah portion last week, Yitro, stated the Ten Commandments, in which an individual shall not murder and shall

not steal. If one were to kidnap a person, therefore stealing their soul, it is as if one commits murder.

The Jewish people are angry and fed-up. For more than 500 days we have felt our joy stolen from us, and doing what we do best, we look to our tradition for answers. Our Torah tells us that we need to hold every person or group accountable when they perform evil acts. In this Torah portion, a justice system is outlined, in which every extremist organization, like Hamas, is held accountable and destroyed. How can we preserve and maintain the justice system that our tradition has given us? As American Jews, we participate in organizations or initiatives that align with our Jewish values, while remaining deliberate and intentional about what we support in order to eliminate Hamas and seek justice for every Jew.

Constant reflections of our own Jewish values leads us to support initiatives that seek justice for all people. Our choices of what and who we support is intrinsically tied to the values we believe in. At our Temple's Religious School, we constantly teach and reinforce the different Jewish values found in our tradition, because we know that through repetition and seeing the cause and effect of living out our values will greatly impact our children's actions and involvement in the community in the future. Even as adults, we can find time to reflect on the Jewish values we uphold and reexamine how we live out those values every day. Jewish tradition provides a pathway to the discipline of acting out our Jewish values through the practice of Mussar. Mussar is typically described as the study of Jewish ethics, but it is more than that. According to a scholar in the field, Alan Morinis, "Mussar is

inherently a process of growing... The more we become living embodiments of our ideals, the more we transition from our partialness (even brokenness) toward becoming more whole, and in wholeness we become vessels for holiness itself.” Through our actions and lived experiences we will continue to practice our Jewish values, and one way we do that is by supporting organizations and initiatives that align with our beliefs.

Some initiatives may align with our own Jewish values, but at times the same organizations/initiatives we support may challenge other beliefs we may hold. As many are aware, the World Zionist Congress elections are being held in the next couple of weeks. Our Temple will have an information session about it next week! The World Zionist Congress is an organization that allows Jews in the diaspora to have a say on legislation, policies, and budgetary projects happening in Israel. ARZA, the Reform Movement’s liaison between American Jews and the state of Israel, has a platform that we can vote for that aligns with our movements’ values. If you take anything away from my sermon, please know that I fully support ARZA’s platform in the World Zionist Congress elections, and I urge you all to participate this year and vote. With that being said, there are propositions on the ARZA platform that I personally disagree with and challenge other beliefs I hold. I am experiencing this tension of fully supporting a platform that I believe will make positive changes in Israel, while knowing that I do not 100% agree with everything that is proposed. This is not an exclusive problem to the WZC and ARZA. We might feel this tension between supporting a politician, legislation, platform, or initiative that mostly agrees with our values while challenging some of our other beliefs. While we feel

this tension often, we determine what value and belief takes priority over the other in moments of need. So what do we prioritize?

Prioritizing the safety and security of the Jewish people will lead us towards justice for all. Our Jewish values and beliefs need to be rooted in our love and support of our own people at all times. Halacha, Jewish law, decrees that the needs of one's own household must come first. Yoreh Deah 251, a halachic text states that in the case of charity, for example, any relative should be given preference to a stranger; a poor person of one's own city to that of a poor person of another city, etc. Why should we prioritize our own people in our advocacy? Because we will not be able to help others around us if we do not take care of ourselves first. Yes, we should protect and help the stranger, AND we need to look at our own people and see and address our own needs. When we strengthen our own people, we will be able to commit to fighting for justice for all people. When we support initiatives and organizations that align with our Jewish values, let's first start with the institutions that focus on the security and support of our own people.

Researching each organization or initiative we choose to align with builds our confidence in what we are standing for. Circulating on my Facebook last week, rabbis were urging rabbis and other leaders to sign their name under the following prompt that would be advertised in the New York Times: "Trump has called for the removal of all Palestinians from Gaza. Jewish people say no to ethnic cleansing!" Over 350 rabbis signed their name to this, without full consideration of the organization that was paying for

this advertisement. I do not want to focus on the ad's message, but rather who was behind it. It was revealed after the publication of this advertisement in the New York Times that the organization paying for this ad was saynotoethniccleansing.com, which is owned and operated by "In Our Name", an organization that supports BDS initiatives, calls Israel an apartheid regime, and does not recognize the Jewish people's right to self-determination. I do not know if my colleagues who signed this letter regret doing so, now knowing they signed in solidarity with an organization that believes in the destruction of Israel. Many of those who signed, I know have a deep love for Israel and believe in its continued existence. In moments of intense emotions, we might seek initiatives that on face-value agree with our Jewish values. However, it is imperative that we pause and examine any organization or initiative we choose to align with in our search for justice.

For a long time now, we have felt exhausted, sad, and angry, and we ask ourselves constantly, "When will all of this be over?!" Find the organization or initiative that speaks to your Jewish values, but let's do our due diligence. Let's be certain that in our advocacy for the Jewish people and the state of Israel, that every social media post, monetary donation, and conversation is in the best interest of our people and is rooted in justice.

הגיד לך אדם מה טוב ומה יי דורש ממך כי אם עשות משפט ואהבת חסד
והצנע לקת עם אלהיך

Higid l'cha adam ma tov uma Adonai doreish mim'cha: ki im asot mishpat v'ahavat chesed v'hatzneia lechet im Elohecha.

“It has been told to you, person, what is good and what the Eternal requires of you: to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)