

Peoplehood

While this has been an exciting week for some of us who have [enjoyed playoff baseball](#), celebrations, and *simchas* (*smahot*), it has been a very difficult week in Israel. Our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land have experienced a week and a half of random terror. Instead of waves of suicide bombers or missiles launched by terrorist organizations, Israelis are now experiencing stabbings, shootings, and car rammings by Palestinians as young as 13. It is not coordinated. It seems to be everywhere. It is scary.

My heart goes out to the families of those who were murdered. And may their memories be for a blessing. We pray for healing for those injured and an end to this violence. Let me also add that it is not a “cycle of violence,” as it is often mis-portrayed in places like the *New York Times*.

A cycle of violence implies tit-for-tat in an endless circle; while it may look like that, this is not an accurate characterization as it does not convey what is occurring. When someone takes a screwdriver and starts stabbing people at a bus stop and someone else takes out a gun and shoots the perpetrator – and, yes, sometimes kills him or her – that is not a cycle.

That is a murderer or attempted murderer being killed. It is permissible under American and Israeli law.

And it is encouraged under Jewish law.

That is the law of *rodef* – the pursuer. If you see someone pursuing someone to kill them, you must try to stop them (if you can do so without endangering your life – not always simple); better to trip them, but if you cannot, you can use force and even kill them to save another's life. That is not a cycle of violence, but either self-defense or the defense of others. Some of the coverage of this violence in America and even more so in Europe has been atrocious.

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Last Monday morning, I had a wonderful opportunity to meet with 11th grade students from the Ironi-Hey School in Haifa, our sister city. They were visiting Boston for a couple of weeks and spending time with some of the 11th grade students at Gann Academy.



The school invited rabbis from different perspectives: Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Reform, and Non-Denominational – to share

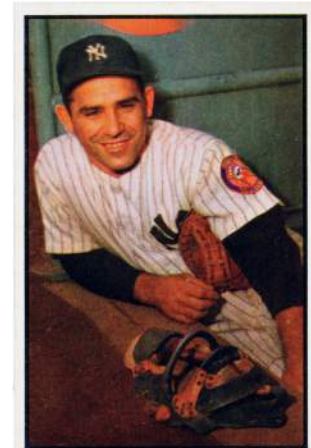
their approach to Judaism. I shared my background and the story of my spiritual journey and rabbinic calling.

They asked good questions about my views on issues like LGBTQ inclusivity (I spoke strongly in support), egalitarianism (again, the same), the environment (once again, the same). In fact, I realized I came across as pretty progressive.

But when they asked me about Israel, I also stood strongly in support of Israel – especially during this time when her citizens find themselves under attack.

I was then asked to reconcile those two – how could I be centrist on Israel and left on other issues.

I told the students that I was not signing up for consistency on all issues. In the words of Yogi Berra, may his memory be blessed, “I calls ‘em as I sees ‘em.” I am not trying to line up into a particular political party or group. I stand up for what I believe.



And then I was asked about Jewish peoplehood: how can I justify standing up for my people?

Well, first, let me say that I do stand up for my people before others. That's why, when organizations criticize Israel during war or when Israel is under attack, I am disappointed. This is not something I can sanction.

We are taught as Jews to first stand up for ourselves. It might be difficult to justify, but it is what I feel.

For example, if, God forbid, I had to choose to save one child – mine or someone's else, I would save mine first. You might say, why? Is my child better than another?

No.

My child is not better or more valuable than anyone else's child, it is just it is MY child, it is my family. We first care for our own children.

The same goes for the Jewish people. The Jewish people are my extended family. While Jews are not better than other people, they are my people, my extended family. That is what peoplehood is about.

And let us be honest. Peoplehood is under attack in America today. When I speak to our college students today, they, more and more, believe that they should be citizens of the world or Americans, or ethical human beings, more than they want to be Jews.

Why?

Because that is what they are being taught. All people are equal and why should we treat one group differently than another.

While this is a real phenomenon, I have to disagree with it. I think those who disparage notions of peoplehood are missing something.

They are missing the feeling of being in a family, a rather large family, maybe even a large, dysfunctional family, but a family nonetheless. (And what family does not have some measure of dysfunction?)

Being a part of a family means we feel loved and cared for and we care for and love others. It is dangerous; we risk for our families, we feel vulnerable with our families. And we might feel so much allegiance to our families that we risk favoring them in an unjust manner.

That is not what I am advocating for. I criticize my family. [I criticize Israel](#). I have done so publicly.

But when my family is taking missile fire (during the summer of 2014, for example) or random stabbings and car



rammings (right now!), I stand by them.

They need me. And I need to be there for them.

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Let us turn to this morning's *parashah* for a moment. Shaina focused beautifully on the animals and reminded us that our tradition teaches us to respect and care for animals in groundbreaking ways.

But this *parashah* is also about caring for one's family. When God tells him to, Noah saves himself and his family. He basically just cares about himself. As one of the rabbinic commentary offers, he was blameless – *bidorotav* – in his generation and this was not an impressive generation.

That is where we start; where we should start. We start with ourselves. When the Talmud discusses being stranded in the wilderness with only enough water for one person to survive. If all other factors are equal, the person who brought the water, keeps it and lives. His life takes precedence.

That is very different from the Christian perspective where Jesus teaches that they should split the water and both die.

Our tradition states clearly that we start with ourselves, and then our families. But we do not end there. As Hillel states in the Mishnah, “*U’kh’she’ani l’atzmi, ma ani* – if I am only for myself, what am I?” We are supposed to reach beyond ourselves and our families.

Look at Noah, for example. While he is called a righteous man in his generation, the rabbis see Noah on the lowest tier of moral leadership. Abraham is considered to be on a higher rung since when God threatens to destroy the cities of *S’dom* and *Amorah*, he argues with God on their behalf. Challenging God, he looks beyond himself and his family.

That is why, while Noah is given the covenant, a universal covenant, he is not given the more unique and intense covenant between God and the Jewish people.

Abraham and Sarah were models of hospitality and reaching beyond themselves and arguing on behalf of

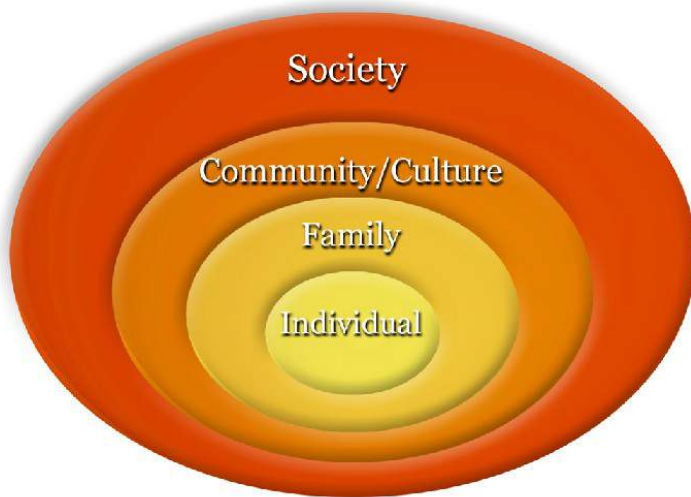


others; the unique covenant was formed with them. Abraham and Sarah become the parents of the entire Jewish people.

This tension between caring for our people and for others is reflected in a Talmudic discussion. The Talmud teaches us that if you have to choose between helping someone who is related to you or someone else,

you begin with your relative.

A Jew and non-Jew; you begin with the Jew. Or, someone who lives in your city or in another town – *Aniyei irkha kodmim* (“the poor of your city take



precedence.”) This establishes a hierarchy of priorities in favor of those closest to you in terms of family (including non-Jewish family members), the Jewish people and then all others.

And it makes sense. We should begin with those closest to us. We should take care of our own. Here at Emunah, we must make sure that we take care of our community’s needs.



But we do not stop there. Once we have taken care of our family, of the Jewish people, of local needs, we turn to others as well. Why?

Because *mitzvah goreret mitzvah* – performing a commandment leads to performing more commandments. And doing a good deed leads to more good deeds. Once we are in the habit of doing good, we continue on that path. That is why Jews have been at the forefront of helping others throughout the world – be they in Darfur or Haiti or Nepal.

But it is OK to feel a closer connection with our people. Having the Jewish people be a people, an extended family, preserves us and allows us to have the impact on all humanity that we have had and we, God willing, will continue to have. Jews have made an outsized impact on this planet in almost every way.

And that begins by nourishing ourselves and taking care of our families.

We need to reemphasize our Jewish identity so we and our young people feel the importance of Jewish peoplehood. We need to feel that we are part of a family.

Ultimately Noah, like many other prominent biblical characters, is flawed. He builds his ark, but does not challenge God first by asking if

there are not others, those in the next circle, perhaps, who should also be saved.

Why does the Torah assign such a large role, in essence, the second Creation, to someone so lacking in moral judgment?

Because it demonstrates the extent to which Noah is human. It is precisely Noah, who errs by not trying to save his larger family, tribe, city, humanity, who ironically becomes the progenitor of humanity.

We, as Jews, first care for our own – our families, then for the next ‘our own’ – our Jewish people, then for the next ‘our own,’ the rest of America, then for the next ‘our own’ – humanity.

But we start with ourselves: we must care for our family – for if we do not, who will?