

There is a famous midrash about the creation of human beings. When God was about to create the first human beings, the angels split up into contending groups. Some said, "Let humanity be created!" And others said, "Do not let humanity be created!" The angels divided into smaller camps to press their case. One camp, representing the attribute of Compassion said, "Create human beings, because they will perform deeds of kindness." An opposing camp representing Shalom said, "Do not create human beings, because they will be violent." At which point the group representing Righteousness, tzedek said, "Let human beings be created, because they will pursue justice." And then the group representing truth stepped forward and said, "Do not create human beings, because they will be liars." At which point God took truth and cast it into the ground, as the Proverbs teach, "Truth will sprout from the earth," and so the path was clear for humanity to appear.

This is a haunting, brilliant and enigmatic story, and we could talk about it for hours. I wish I could tell you exactly what it means.

But for our purposes today, I want to draw on two points. One is that it contains the essential question that we may feel when the world seems consumed by violence – are we worth all the trouble, and is there hope for humanity? I think this midrash expresses a realistic, cautious hope – despite everything, we are here.

The second point is that our hope lies in our ability to face the "truth," to "let it sprout forth from the ground," as the Proverb teaches. There is a warning on this score attributed to the Kotzker Rebbe – truth is buried because, as humans, we yearn for peace, AND we want truth, but it's hard for us to live with both. Put another way, we have hope as a species the more we live with reality, in all of its perplexity, by holding onto multiple truths and multiple points of view. As I reflected yesterday, the great Israeli writer Amos Oz has said this is essential to restoring some sanity to our world. And it also means doing what the midrash suggests may be impossible – going through life with all our attributes – compassion and justice, peace and honesty – and not cherry picking which ones suit us at a particular time.

Can we hold it all?

For Jews, one of the most painful tests of our capacity to marshal hope and live in this holistic way is how we respond to anti-Semitism. A recent op-ed by the great Jewish historian Deborah Lipstadt echoed the wrestling of Jews as we face the trend of anti-Semitic acts in Europe over the past several months. Lipstadt points to a reflexive tendency among many of us to be overwhelmed by fear and imagine that we are reverting to 1939 in Germany. However, she is quick to point out that European governments now condemn acts of anti-Semitism, whereas in the 1930's and '40's they were silent or complicit. But as Lipstadt warns against living with an illusion of complete safety and security, as those who dismiss these incidents as harmless rhetoric of fringe "disgruntled Muslim youth." Instead, she sees something distinct emerging that leaves us in an ambiguous state. Whereas the Holocaust was built upon the foundation of centuries of European Christian anti-Semitism, the new manifestation is a recent brew drawn from

extremist “Antipathy toward non-Muslims, medieval Christian anti-Semitism and more secularist, leftist anti-Semitism.” It’s a potent mix, and it can be found in the popular culture, and perhaps most vehemently in the rhetoric and charter of Hamas, which famously draws on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and medieval blood libels against the Jews. Neither dismissive nor despairing, Lipstadt leaves us with an uneasy assessment about the current state of anti-Semitism: **This is not another Holocaust, but it’s bad enough.**

I am similarly troubled by the animus surrounding Israel here at home, and it has led me to wonder about the distinction at times between anti-Zionism and anti-Jewishness, that is, not only holding intellectual or moral objections to the notion of a Jewish state, but harboring antipathy toward the notion of Jewish peoplehood and the Jewish story. Someone tried to burn our Israeli flag. And while this act stirred fear and anxiety among a number of us, I am inclined to see it as an isolated act, not part of a trend. I am much more troubled by some of the rhetoric generated by protests downtown this summer against the war in Gaza. Protests are a legitimate and welcome expression, even protests against Israel’s actions, as painful as they are to me personally. But I wonder if people chanting, “One Palestine from the river to the sea” understand that they are calling for the eradication of the State of Israel and a negation of a central piece of modern Jewish history. I would like to know if people who dress in black and wear face masks realize they are wearing the uniform of those who stand behind the charge to “kill Jews wherever they are found,” as it says in the Hamas charter. I doubt such people are true anti-Semites – we also have our statements that don’t do well out of context. I just hope they are getting a little too caught up in the political theater of the moment.

For those who haven’t experienced it, the kind of exchanges one might experience on Facebook are particularly disturbing, because they occur under the illusion of intimacy, but one in which people feel they can say anything they want. The best way I can describe the experience is to imagine you are at a friend’s dinner party gone awry. Imagine you’re friends with someone through work, or the neighborhood, and have never really sat down for an earnest conversation about your politics. You go to your friend’s house for a party with lots of other people, and your friend says something off the cuff about how Israel is genocidal, and how armed resistance is justified in such atrocities. All of a sudden, 20 of the guests raise their glasses in agreement, and say things that are even more inflammatory. Instead of leaving, you decide to speak up, respectfully and without anger. You point out that, while you deplore the loss of innocent life, the so-called “resistance” is fueled by a professed hatred of Jews and they fire rockets intentionally at civilian targets. At this point, the other guests scream at you, call you an (expletive) Zionist and accuse you of supporting the murder of children. You hear other disturbing things – like references to Israel as “Occupied Palestine,” or simply, ’48, how the anti-Semitic violence in Europe is the fault of the IDF, and how boycotts against everything Israeli are the only way to go. But you don’t leave. You assert that, while the violence is deplorable now, you believe that there is a critical mass of people – Palestinians and Israelis – who are willing to live in two prosperous states side by side in peaceful coexistence, and this is the vision you support. Your rational, principled vision only draws more ridicule – you are bourgeois, naïve, neo-liberal, a lazy drawer of moral

equivalence – and at no point do any of the guests, or your friend, recognize the yearnings and strivings of the Jewish story, or the legitimacy of Israel as a state. It leaves one feeling alone, confused, and angry, even if it's happening all on a screen.

Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is a time for everything. Most painfully, there is a time for war and a time for peace, and a time for self-defense in the presence of hate. But I am concerned that, in the name of self-preservation, we may find ourselves doing the things that disgust us when done by others. And believe me, on FB pages of friends of mine, whose love of Israel and the Jewish people I admire, I have also seen some pretty disturbing things. And so I don't want to see us compromise our sense of compassion, or endorse violence when other means are available, or skew the facts so that we will feel safe and secure in our own understanding – even though people we may know and respect will lose perspective, wittingly or unwittingly endorse violence and skew the facts to their own purposes.

But more than that, what are we if, in talking about the need to stand up for ourselves, we ignore imperatives that are equally clear: to guard against oppression of the stranger, to do justice and love what is good, to seek and pursue peace and to love creation, even or perhaps especially when human beings erupt in violence.

As our midrash warns us, our challenge is to embody *all* our middot – the seeking of justice AND compassion, shalom, well-being AND truth, especially when they conflict, which is probably all the time.

Rosh Hashanah is an opportune moment to consider this test we face: to live with the full complement of our humanity, even when it seems impossible. Fittingly, our Torah portion for today, the Akedah, Abraham's binding of Isaac, shows us how easily our basic human capacities can be undone when situations propel us into such internal and overwhelming conflicts.

Whatever our tradition says about Abraham having passed a test of faith, he failed the test we all face: to hold on to his attributes of love and reason at the same time. At the beginning of the story, the Torah tells us explicitly of Abraham's love for his son, Isaac. In speaking to Abraham, God explicitly refers to Isaac as the son "whom you love." And, at the same time, while embodying this love, Abraham was completely clearheaded in following God's instruction to sacrifice Isaac. The text tells us that Abraham reached Mount Moriah, the place of sacrifice, on the 3rd day of their journey, certainly long enough to discern if this mission was truly from God or a product of Abraham's fevered mind.

Rashi emphasizes the point. He asks, "Why did God make Abraham wait 3 days? So that one wouldn't say that Abraham was confused, acted out of impulse or was not of his right mind. Had he been given time, he would have changed his mind." In the Torah, Abraham's decision to follow God's command was thoroughly rational.

But Abraham couldn't hold it all, the love of his son and his clear-eyed, rational obedience to God. A rational mind sees contradictory forces at work, and tries to sort them out to make sense of the chaos. And so, the Zohar asks, "Why did Abraham not protest?" That would have been the reasonable thing to do. But it appears that Abraham's reason only allows him to hear God's voice clearly, but not much beyond his capacity, or desire, to see anything else.

More tragically, the Torah suggests that Abraham passed his test of faith only by inhibiting his love for Isaac. The angel says to Abraham, "I know that you fear God, for you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" But where is the additional statement that was so important earlier, that Isaac was the son whom Abraham loved? That love is diminished now, and replaced by the "fear of God" lauded by the angel. And we see in this story that a life based on fear is not a life people want to be a part of. After the intervention of the angel, Abraham and Isaac leave this scene broken, each going their separate ways, reunited only at Abraham's death.

It is easy to condemn the biblical Abraham, but he is just like us. In the heat of the moment, when our passions are aroused, it can be hard for us to meld reason and love, fear and empathy. In this latest round of conversations about the war in Gaza, I heard from people who challenged me that talking about peace is futile, or naïve, when we see the depth of hatred among Israel's enemies. I often felt that way myself. But I also have to ask the question – even if we or people we love are under siege, at what cost do we curtail our compassion and empathy? Do we want to repeat the mistake of Avraham Avinu and live in fear and brokenness, or do we want to do something, anything, as a protest against the wave of violence, cynicism and despair?

The Rabbis of the midrash rehabilitate Abraham, portray him as both a thoroughly clear headed AND loving man. What would a rational, loving person do in this situation? He or she would protest against God for putting Abraham and Isaac through this trial, and use it as a bargaining chip to save humanity. And that's exactly what Abraham in the midrash does. The Rabbis imagine Abraham excoriating God for putting him through this, and demanding that, every Rosh Hashanah, our sounding the shofar will arouse God's compassion so that we will be forgiven and sustained through God's kindness.

There was a moment this summer when I made a decision about trying to hold on to some reason and if not exactly turn toward love, then at least away from condemnation and judgment. There was a letter to the NYT by the Episcopal chaplain at Yale, responding to Deborah Lipstadt's op-ed. The minister wrote that the op-ed had not sufficiently explored the relationship between Israel's policies in the West Bank and Gaza and acts against Jews, clearly linking the two in a causal relationship. He further advised that the best antidote to anti-Semitism would be for Israel's supporters around the world to press the Netanyahu government to bring peace..

This letter felt like one of blaming anti-Semitism on Israel, as opposed to denouncing hatred and positing a correlation between the two. I could have remained satisfied in my interpretation and my judgment and left it at that. But I decided to look

for more. So I wrote the minister a note. I found his email address online, and I told him that I reject the linkage he made – you don't blame attacks on synagogues outside Paris on Israel's war in Gaza. I told him that I, too, want peace – 2 states for 2 peoples. But hatred is hatred and should be acknowledged as such, no matter how one feels about Israel's policies.

The minister wrote me back immediately - with real warmth and understanding. He said "Amen" to everything I wrote. He said he did not mean to blame Jews for anti-Semitism, though he did think there was a correlation between Israel's policies and such acts. He even issued a public statement to that effect and apologized for any misunderstanding. In the end, Yale disavowed him, pointing out he served the university community but wasn't employed by the university. And just a couple of days later, the minister handed in his resignation.

It's a loss, I think, to keep the messy, flawed truth of how we grapple with ultimate issues underground. There is a place, to be sure, for labeling certain kinds of acts and speech as hatred and anti-Semitism – we would be fools not to. But I still believe that the real haters are a small number. Most of the people we come in contact with, I believe, are torn. And in being torn, they, as we, need the support of dialogue and companionship to hold multiple truths simultaneously, and to temper the fire of their convictions with compassion.

The Akedah awakens us to how hard it is to be a loving and a discerning human being. Abraham, our hero, couldn't keep his mind clear and heart fully open at the same time. But still, our Rabbis say we have to – so that we may uncover truth in the ground while also loving humanity, especially when those two goals appear to be at odds. Perhaps then we will have the tzedek AND the compassion, and the shalom AND the truth we pursue.