

“Reaching across a great divide: Acting in the interests of peace”

Genesis 25:7-10

Proverbs 3:17; Mishnah Gittin 5:8

This week, Jews around the world celebrated the holiday of Purim. The holiday, based on the book of Esther, provides an insider’s perspective on an existential threat to the Jewish people in ancient Persia, contemporary Iran. It features a hapless king, Ahasuarus, his hate-filled advisor, Haman, a sober Jewish leader, Mordechai, and Mordechai’s beautiful niece and the king’s consort, Esther, who becomes the unlikely hero of her people. God is absent from the book, which ends dramatically, with the thwarting of the plot against the Jews, Haman, the bad guy, hanging from a tall gallows and all the enemies of the Jews getting their comeuppance. The description of the Jews of Persia defeating their enemies is replete with humor, exaggeration and fantasy. Indeed, the entire story, which historically is reenacted in synagogue by loudly drowning out the name of the bad guy, Haman, is a fantasy of the powerless overcoming the powerful.

In hearing the book of Esther, those without responsibility or agency imagine the satisfaction and exhilaration of revenge and retribution. It is no small irony that this week Purim coincided with the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Many people, Jews and non-Jews alike, Israelis and Americans, those who were at the conference and beyond it understand the possibility of Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon to be a contemporary existential threat. Fear abounds. The sound of saber rattling against Iran—amplified by the megaphones of an election season—has reached a crescendo. The voices of presidential candidates, without responsibility for such a fateful decision or its implications, nevertheless soar to bellicose heights, imagining the righteousness and glory of surgical strikes against Iran. But like the throngs blotting out Haman’s name, celebrating the defeat of the enemy, they can revel in a world of black and white—of good guys and bad guys. They don’t need to consider the cost of going to war. Into this climate of saber rattling, President Obama sounded a sober note. Unlike his political adversaries, he is the one responsible to order those strikes—and to ponder their costs and consequences. As a leader he must weigh both power and responsibility. No decision is simple. Many interests abound. Operating not from the fantasy of power, but with its mantle weighing heavily upon him, he

must ask how to reach across great divides. His position compels him to question: What must we do in the interests of peace?

How a community acts, *mipnei darchei shalom*, “In the interests of peace” is the subject of much debate in the Talmud. A few weeks ago, I had the luxury of a week of Jewish text study with a group of rabbis interested in social justice. Tzvi Blanchard, the brilliant, passionate and compassionate orthodox rabbi who led our study insisted, “Traditional texts are not tinsel that we hang on positions we already hold.” Rather, a nuanced study of sacred texts helps us to illuminate what human issues are at stake, to understand the anxieties and aspirations of our adversaries. The first text we studied set the tone: How does a community act, *mipnei darchei shalom*, in the interests of peace? In some cases, the interests will be to lessen strife. In others, to foster justice. In still others, to acknowledge self interest but to bring a bigger picture into focus. There is a wide range of examples of conduct listed in the Talmud in the interests of peace—from ritual observance to safety to economic fairness to caring for the poor. But the example that receives the most consideration from the rabbis is one that weighs the interests of “one of us” with the interests of those outside the community. “They must not prevent the poor among the non-Jews from gathering the gleanings, the forgotten sheaf and the corners of the field, in the interests of peace.”

The bible mandates that when harvesting crops, it is forbidden to harvest from the corners of the field, to gather the gleanings that have dropped or to go back to get a forgotten sheaf. (Lev. 19:9, Lev. 23:22, Deut. 24:19) This food must be left for the poor, the stranger, the fatherless and the widow. (Lev. 19:10, Lev. 23:22, Deut. 24:19-21) But the bible doesn’t specify that this agricultural safety net specifically applies to non-Jews. Yet, the Talmud does, and elaborates further that it is necessary, *mipnei darchei shalom*, in the interests or in the paths of peace. What interests of peace are being promoted? Is it self-serving to let the poor who are not “one of us” access what those in our community may need? Some argue that the commandment to support the poor whether or not they are “one of us” points us toward divine compassion. We imitate God by our own actions. To take care of the needy—our own or anyone else’s—affirms that all human beings are made in God’s image. (Rambam Hilchot Avadim). We recognize ourselves in one another. “In the interests of peace” *mipnei darchei shalom*, here invites us to keep a bigger picture in mind. Other interpretations are more pragmatic. If we take care of others in need in the same way that we take care of our own, we will reduce unrest and suspicion. It is a pragmatic act that will build some goodwill that may be helpful for the times when we may be misunderstood or hope that others will

stand up for us.

The virtues of acting in the interests of peace and the goodwill that it engenders, was much in evidence a few weeks ago when Fadi Quran, a 2010 physics and international relations Stanford graduate from Ramallah was arrested while participating in a demonstration in Hebron. At Stanford, Fadi was not only a strong advocate for the Palestinian cause; he was also a serious student of nonviolence. He visited India with Gandhi scholar Linda Hess and Martin Luther King Jr. scholar Clayborne Carson. He was a year-long fellow at *Abraham's Vision*, a conflict transformation organization that brings Jews, Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians to the Balkans to explore alternatives to violence. Fadi was well respected on campus both for his passionate Palestinian advocacy and for his willingness to participate in respectful dialogue on issues close to his heart. As news of his arrest and detention spread on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, the outcry on his behalf within the Stanford community was immediate, heartfelt and inclusive. Over and over students, faculty and alumni described their friendship, their respect, their appreciation for Fadi's courage, articulateness, and authenticity. This legacy—of garnering respect and the willingness to engage with adversaries—is a significant piece of what Fadi Quran created, among Palestinians and Muslims, but equally, among Jews and Israelis and others at Stanford. Shortly after the outpouring of concern for his well-being within the Stanford community, Fadi was released.

This young man, Fadi Quran reached across a great divide; his willingness to respect his adversaries, to listen to their anxieties and aspirations built up goodwill and friendship. He set a foundation by acting *mipnei darchei shalom*, in the interests of peace.

Although it was planned long before Fadi's arrest and release, another opportunity for continued campus dialogue across difference recently occurred. Last Shabbat, Hillel hosted an interfaith Shabbat in memory of Avi Gross Schaefer. I have been close to the Gross Schaefer family for many years, celebrating weddings and babies, mourning together the losses of our parents. Our families camped in Yosemite and our kids swam in streams and gobbled up pancakes in the shape of Mickey Mouse together. Avi grew up in Santa Barbara, but he had strong ties to Israel. I worried with their parents when, after high school, Avi and his twin brother Yoav enlisted in the Israeli army as "lone soldiers"—those without family in Israel. Avi became a counterterrorism instructor, completed his service and returned to the States to attend Brown University.

I still feel the agony of that February morning two years ago when I received word that a night of relaxing at the bars with friends ended on an icy road a few blocks from the Brown campus—when another young man got into his car after drinking and plowed into Avi as he was crossing the street.

Over a thousand of us were at his funeral, which was too heartbreaking for words. But at the synagogue, and at the gravesite, more powerful than words was the presence of Avi's Palestinian friend, Sami Jarbawi. Their first encounter was an argument about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at a meeting of a group called "Common Ground"—that wasn't. Then Avi took an Arabic class that Sami TA'd and Avi initiated a friendship, one that grew as they planned to examine narratives from both sides of the conflict. They did not sidestep controversy. In their last email exchange, Avi sought Sami's opinion about a speech by Palestinian National Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

This authentic and brave friendship that was formed in college between an American Jew who became an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian Muslim, was one forged in the interests of peace.

Indeed, Avi used to quote his dad who said, "an enemy is someone whose story you have not yet heard." He may have learned how to use weapons, but his dedication was *mipnei darchei shalom*, in the interests of peace. He recognized the humanity of those who had vastly different experiences, anxieties and aspirations.

For Avi wrote in his Brown admissions essay, "Experiencing the Middle Eastern conflict through my direct involvement in the Israeli army has taught me that the only path to peace in this region of the world is through dialogue and education. The continual cycle of violence will cease only when both sides realize and understand the needs and aspirations of the other. It is my quest to help find solutions to the problems plaguing the Middle East. I believe a university education will give me the additional skills and necessary knowledge to help solve the kinds of cultural and ethnic problems that I have seen first hand."

Tragically, Avi Gross Schaefer will not get to use those skills and knowledge to bring peace to the Middle East. But those of us here, be we Jew, Muslim, Christian, American, Israeli, Palestinian, or others, those of us touched by his story--we can. Just as Isaac and Ishmael were together, present at the death of their father, Abraham, so conflicts can resolve in the face of sad loss. It is up to us to carry out this dream, to engage in difficult conversations with

respect and authenticity, to listen with compassion and to speak with kindness.

It is up to us to recognize the Divine in each other, to sustain those who are poor in hope as well as those we claim as one of our own. It is up to us to consider the consequences of bellicose rhetoric and, in our own lives to carefully balance power and responsibility. It is up to us, just like Avi and Sami, like Fadi, like Isaac and Ishamel, to reach across the great divide, to act *mipnei darchi shalom*, in the interests of peace. Zichrono l'vracha. May the memory of Avi Schaefer be for each of us, a challenge, an inspiration and a blessing.