

Vayeishev 5784
 In the Field
 Rabbi Betsy Forester

In our *parashah*, Yaacov settles. That's the first thing that we are told: Vayeishev Yaacov—Yaacov settled. He has returned home to his homeland with his family and settled there. But we know that his life will be anything but settled, and the name of the *parashah* really stands out as a bit of a misnomer if we think about what actually happens. Almost the next thing we know, he loses his beloved son Yosef, portending the family's descent and eventual bondage, not in their homeland, but in Egypt, a completely different place. The narrative line that has a settled presence in Canaan for B'nei Yisrael is intersected by a different narrative line that of family strife and communal displacement. In fact, the *parashah* is filled with conflicting and disconnected narratives. I'd like to see if we can think of some together. I'll throw out lunch just to get started and then send you back to the Yosef story. This one has to do with you and Tamar. So Tamra is stuck in a marital and childbearing limbo. She's really chained; she is a widow until she is married to the third child of Yehudah—Judah— and he is not willing to give her his child. He's reluctant because he thinks she's dangerous. She has already been widowed by each of his other two children, and he is loathe to put his third son in what he must perceive as existential danger—two different narratives involving the same people and their encounter.

What's another one? (*Members offered the following, reiterated by the Rabbi:*)

- The cupbearer and the baker telling their dreams. Their outcomes may not match up with their actual deeds, their sense of justice.
- Yosef and Potiphar's wife, yes. She wants him and it's not clear if he wants her but he is not going to engage—and she thinks that he will, that he should, and he thinks that he is not going to do that. And she tells a story of what happened which is not what happened according to the narrator.
- Yaacov has within his own sensibility some conflicting stories about how his sons are to regard one another interact and be there for each other.
- And Yosef brings a bad report after having been out with his brothers, having gone to see them. He's a young guy. They are grown men, shepherds, and he goes out, and whatever he sees of their adult behavior, he doesn't like, apparently, or maybe he's just making things up, whereas the brothers have their own experience of being grown-up shepherds out there doing whatever they're doing in the course of their work or the course of their free time—we don't really know—but my guess is that they don't think they're deserving of the bad report that comes to their father.

- Yosef's self image versus his brothers' perception of him: He seems quite pleased with himself, feels a sense of connection to God in all that he is all that happens to him. In the ancient world dreams were believed to be Divine messages, and so when he prances around in his fancy tunic and tells them of his dreams—the rabbis even embellish how he carries himself—he walks on his toes, he wears make up—he is having quite a good time. He is delighted with himself, he's delighted with God's vision for him, and his brothers see him completely differently. They don't get him, they don't like him, they resent him, and they're very very bothered by his telling of stories. Divine or otherwise, they will have none of it.

Hanukkah also means different things depending on the story that we're telling. And it's celebrated by different groups of people with different emphases depending on how they are wanting to tell the story.

- It is the story of a civil war between Jews at that time.
- It is a victory of ultra religious Jews defeating assimilated Jews, with the help and the terrible behavior of the Syrian-Greeks and their army
- It is the victory of a small band of Jews over that Syrian Greek army at least in that moment. That is how it has been typically celebrated in Israel. It is a military victory. It is a holiday, and an exceedingly rare one, that celebrates Jewish power.
- It is the victory of the small over the mighty.
- It is the story of the dedication of the sacred sanctuary of the Temple after it has been sullied. That's something to lean into on its own.
- It is also a holiday in which we celebrate a story—a story of a miracle of oil that lasts for eight days until more oil can be sanctified for use in the Temple once it has been rededicated. And that story serves as a symbol for the remarkable miraculous survival of the Jewish people.

There are many different meanings to be found, and we know that we look for meaning in the events of our lives, in our stories, and in our experiences.

That is no less true when we are living through times of shattering, times of brokenness, times of grief, and times of trouble, as we are now. We search for meaning. We hear certain meanings that people out there in the world—Jewish people, and people who are not Jewish—are making of this moment. We tend to hear the most extreme interpretations, the most extreme views. That is a factor of human nature. Our attention goes to extremes. So does the attention of reporters go to extremes. We're drawn to them, and we obsess over them, and we often feel that were the only ones standing in some sort of middle place feeling torn between two extremes or drawn to one or the other.

I have shared with you before that I believe strongly that these times of brokenness are opportunities for special kinds of closeness with the Divine and special ways to learn. We see things differently in a time of distress than we see them when we're going about as we normally like to do.

You may be familiar with the expression "Hakol b'seder"-- everything is in order. Everything is fine. I'm OK. "*hakol b'seder*"--that's what people typically say when asked how they are, what's up what's the latest. There's an expression that a teacher of mine, Elie Holzer, says that he and his friends are using Israel at this time. Changing the last letter of that phrase, people are saying, "*hakol b'sedek*," which means everything is in a state of rupture. Everything is fractured, cracked, on a deep level. And yet it sounds like "*hakol b'seder*." It sounds like everything is fine, and yet it's not. And that feels so much like how I feel, and I'm sure so many of you feel at this time. We are going about our lives. We are eating getting dressed, doing all of the things--having meetings, all of the things that make up our lives. We are even having fun. And yet, we feel internally like something is deeply cracked, deeply fissured.

In a situation like that we can find different ways to see. We may see things we didn't see before. It is an opportunity. In that context, I want to speak with you a bit about the *New York Times* article published this past Tuesday, which centers on a family from this congregation, the Kornblatts--Mark, Judith, their kids, and particularly their daughter Louisa, whom I know, who went to camp with my kids. And I know some of her friends. So what happened; why are they in the *New York Times*? I know some of you know and are very upset about this article and really struggling with it.

The article talks about how Louisa has come to a very different view of Zionism, the State of Israel, and the current state of affairs that follows than the one on which she was raised, the one which her parents hold so dear that they made Aliya and they left Madison, which they loved. They left this community, which they still feel close to, in order to move to Tel Aviv. And we have Louisa, who is saying that Israel does not, in her view, have a right to exist.

Louisa is not alone among young adult Jews who grew up highly engaged. I mentioned to you that I know some of Louisa's friends. Some of these friends are the children of dear friends of mine--a Camp Ramah Director, a Religious School Director, one Conservative Rabbi, and another. These are young adults who grew up solidly in our fold, and they are carrying a different story than the one they were taught earlier.

At this time they have absorbed a narrative in which Israel is an occupied land from the river to the sea. Not only is it an occupied land; it is a colonized place. And not only do

they say that it was colonized, but that it was *brutally* colonized. For them, the injustices of which we have spoken many times together, are all connected to that origin story, all stem from that narrative, which changes the discussion about those concerns—the imperfections of the state and the injustices of the state. Their import, their urgency, and the sense of where to go from there is all affected by where we start and where they start.

I've heard from several members of our kahal who have reached out to me to talk about this. Some have shared with me that their children are speaking in these ways. Parents have told me that they are feeling sad, alarmed, and afraid. And I get that.

And yet, I do think that this is a moment to be “**in a field**,” as it were—to be out there wandering, like the character in today's *parashah* whom whom Yoseph encounters when he has gone out to look for his brothers. He meets a random guy, never named. That random guy is wandering about, out there in the field, and Joseph gets information from him on the basis of where he goes and tracks down his brothers.

In the Torah, fields are often places of different kinds of disputes and disruptions between siblings. Fields are places where people can cause one another a great deal of pain. Fields are not only that, but fields are partly that, and when we feel like we are out in the wilderness, floundering about there, it can be disorienting, and it can inspire a sense of not knowing who we are, and a sense of panic about where things are going, however you slice the situation, whichever way you are viewing it.

To be out in a place like that and be asked to learn, when you're holding a particular story that is dear to you, and it conflicts with the story that others dear to you are holding—it feels scary, and it feels deeply stabilizing.

I have sensed for some weeks now that some of you need to hear certain things explicitly from me. I'm also hearing genuine confusion from some who are reaching out and saying, “what is the history? I actually don't know. I'm hearing all of these things and I am simply confused. So I want to take this opportunity to state a few things as clearly as I see them, and I sense that when I'm done, you will be no less satisfied, if you've been waiting for this, but here we go:

Zionism: I see Zionism as the most impressive, amazing movement of self-determination any people in the world has ever undertaken. Also, Zionism has bred, since its inception, a certain aspect of Jewish exceptionalism that sits just over a thin line next to Jewish superiority, and the impulse to Jewish superiority is making Zionism a very ugly project in parts of Israel and the occupied areas.

The war that Hamas has started: what is it; what is it for? I have believed, and I still believe, that Hamas's attack is a Jihadist attempt to make the area from the River to the Sea, and all other areas where Muslims live, Judenrein- that there should be no Jews living there. It is part of the messianic vision, and that is partly what it's about. The other thing it's about—and it's very much about—is internal Arab politics. I don't believe it is a war of resistance in any way against the Occupation, which you know I am outspoken against—and by the Occupation, I mean what *is* occupied, which is the West Bank, and not Gaza.

And. The Occupation and the living conditions of the Palestinian people in Gaza are unjust, cruel, and in the case of the West Bank, illegal. What is done there, by Israel, in my view, is quite wrong.

Was Israel colonized? And was it colonized brutally? I think Israel was *not* colonized. That is the history that I know. Then under British rule, the land was partitioned, like other lands at that time were partitioned, by the United Nations. It seems to be the way a handful of countries got created for some short time. And when Palestine was partitioned, two states were offered—one for those Jordanians who had taken up residence in Palestine over some generations, and one for the Jews. "Colonization" implies that there is a country that is colonizing, to which the colonizers owe obeisance and which supports those colonizers. Not so in the case of Israel. **And, there was brutality** and displacement of those who had been living there, in very large numbers, and without redress, mostly but not only in Israel's defensive war when the Arabs refused to accept the Jewish State.

Did the State of Israel take over land from Palestinians who were indigenous to the land? Are they the indigenous people of the land? No, I don't think so. I think neither are we—although we were there long before the Palestinians. We always maintained a Jewish presence there, however small, and we returned to settle in the modern State. But I really think that the question of indigeneity is not a question that can be applied without a lot of gymnastics, that at some point fall off and feel unreasonable to me. I don't think the question of indigeneity is at all helpful, and I think it leads to a conversation that is barely comprehensible.

Is Israel morally justified in this war? Defending Israel is a moral imperative of the State of Israel. Sometimes, defense involves removing an enemy, and not simply fighting back on your own land. In that regard, I believe that this war is morally justified. And, I see, because I watch the news, Israel is committing war crimes in Gaza. I see the massacre of thousands and thousands of civilians. That is happening. I am not OK with it. I am not OK with it even though Hamas has committed the most atrocious war crimes

against our people over which we agonize and grieve. I struggle to understand the Commander in Chief, and I struggle to understand what his path to victory—to eliminating Hamas—can possibly be and how the means justify the ends. I agonize over this, too.

Is Israel committing genocide against the Palestinians? No. Israel is not committing genocide anywhere. And, there are Israelis, some in powerful positions, who I think might actually like to bring genocide against the Palestinians.

But is genocide happening? No. Genocide is the deliberate killing of a large number of people from a particular nation or ethnic group with the aim of destroying that nation or group. Israel was attacked and is now fighting back in Gaza against an enemy that uses its citizens as human shields. And the population in the West Bank is growing and has been growing for many years. That doesn't fit with genocide.

And, whatever we call it, I am absolutely horrified by the scale of destruction in Gaza. Israel has crossed a line it was never willing to cross before and we must bear witness. As for the West Bank, we know that Jews are attacking and murdering Palestinians in there, close to 200 since this war began, with barely a reprimand. And I do believe there is a genocidal intention there, and I do believe the army is the other way, and the sanctions they have received are not appropriate.

We hear so much about the State of Israel and the people who live in Israel committing genocide that it almost becomes a reality. We cannot let that stand—neither the disinformation nor the impulse.

How are we to feel about the Israeli soldiers who are putting their lives on the line to defend their country, following the orders of their Commander in Chief? I believe they need our support. These are our friends and relatives and their kids, answering the call of duty as Jews worldwiderely upon them to do. The Israeli government is the appropriate target for our concerns, our attention, and our efforts.

How do I feel about the suffering of the people in Gaza, if I have not made it clear enough? **Where there is suffering of innocents, Jewish people must be concerned. That is core to our mission in the world.** And so we need to be deeply concerned about what is happening, and however right or wrong we see Israel's military response to be, and however much we trust or don't trust the Commander in Chief, we may not turn away from the suffering of human beings. It will destroy us if we do, and I have said that before.

Those are my perspectives at this time.

Now, about this field that I'm suggesting that we be in as we talk to others—to our kids, our kids' friends, and to our kids about their friends and to our friends about their kids or their own views—there's something about this field that I really love. In this field, where Yosef meets the random man who's wandering around, what we're told by the Rabbis that this is where God's will comes to the beginning of its enactment, that Yosef has to be in that field to meet that man in order for the events to unfold according to God's will.

We could have a whole other theological discussion about God's will being the descent to Egypt and centuries of bondage before coming out to freedom—but for our purpose today, if you will, suffice it to say that we're talking about God's will, and we can have an attunement to God's will when we are displaced and wandering, and hearing from people normally we would not encounter.

There's another story about a field that moves me even more, and that is the story of Yaakov, who goes out to the field— "*Vayeitzei Yaacov lasuach basadeh*"-- Yaacov goes to the field where he reflects, meditates, prays—we're not exactly sure what that verb, *lasuach*, means, but it seems to have been some kind of contemplative exercise. And when he looks up from that field, he sees Rivka, who has come to be his wife, and for the first time in the Torah, we find love between two married partners. He has an experience in that field which changes him and moves him to be in a different, more relational place.

I believe we can learn from one another in this field where we are wandering, together, with all of our views. And I know it's really hard to be in this place and not just cover our ears to what we don't like to hear. I know I'm asking us to do something very difficult, whatever our views are. I know that for some of us it will be impossible, and I understand that, and I don't think any less of you if that is the case for you.

But for those of us who can at least try, I would love to think that we could meet in that place, in that field together, that we might yet be able to hold one another in that place, because we are family, because we are connected, because we share a destiny, because all we have is where we are right now. And the tendency to panic, while very, very natural, is not necessary for us to do.

The poet Rumi wrote a beautiful poem in which he says, "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there." That's my hope: that we can meet one another, whether it's peers or kids or older folks, that we can meet one another there, that we can open our arms and look one another in the face, that we can

ask questions like “what makes you sure that this is the truth?” “How do you know this?” “Can we look together at what gives you this impression?” Questions like those, I think, are helpful. That’s my hope.

This Chanukkah it feels strange to say the usual greetings, at least among people who know what’s going on: “Happy Chanukkah, *Chag Urim Sameach*—Happy Festival of Lights. Yet I do wish you all that this festival of lights may illuminate us all, that we may be warmed by, it and that we may come together and feel a bit more whole in doing so. Shabbat shalom.