



Parshat Mezora — Shabbat Hagadol
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Conviction and Humility
by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

What a complicated time. Today is Shabbat Hagadol. We are supposed to prepare ourselves for the first seder next Friday night. But most of the big issues that one might discuss at our *s'darim* are even more fraught than usual.

Israel is part of the seder. God took us out of Egypt to take us to our promised land. The seder ends with *bashanah haba'ah birushalayim*. Next year in Jerusalem. But Israel, always fraught, is even more fraught than usual. The Israeli election this week generates deeply held feelings. It is extremely likely that folks around any seder table would disagree passionately about what these elections mean for Israel and for our relationship with Israel.

Thinking about the vulnerable and the stranger is part of the seder. The Torah's single most frequent command is you were strangers in a strange land, therefore have compassion for others who are strangers in your land. That is always fraught. That is especially fraught now, in this season of a national gridlock over the wall, over asylum seekers, over whether our nation is full, to use the President's term this week. It is extremely likely that folks around any seder table would disagree passionately about what our nation's posture towards asylum seekers should be today.

Thinking about economic and social justice is part of the seder. That we were slaves is core to our story. Our story as a people who had nothing has inspired the psalmist to sing that God lifts up the needy and the Torah to dream of a world without poverty. But how to actually make the biblical ideal of economic justice real is always fraught and is especially fraught now. Talk to your 20-something who is home for the seders about their thoughts on socialism; their

thoughts on capitalism; their thoughts on whether the very words millionaires and billionaires connote deep blessing or policy failure. The folks around any seder table are going to think very different thoughts about social and economic justice.

All of which leads to what seems to be a lose-lose proposition. It seems like we have two bad options.

One option is: don't talk about anything that matters so that we can preserve *shalom bayit*, peace around the seder table. Talk about the Red Sox. Rough start! The weather. Still so cold, can you believe it. The food. I just went gluten-free. Not for trendy reasons. For health reasons. Is there any gluten-free matza?

The other option is: it's a jungle out there. Talk about the stuff that matters, but watch out when your 20-something from Oberlin talks to her 85-year old grandfather about Israel today, and both are deeply hurt and offended by the other's point of view.

Is there a third move? What would it look like to talk about the hardest issues in a hard time, where people disagree deeply, and still the conversation is beautiful and uplifting.

I think I have something helpful to suggest, and it comes from two speeches, one that I heard directly, and one that I heard about.

Recently I spent an afternoon listening to four Ted talks delivered in Kenmore Square. The subjects were diverse. Dizziness. Intimacy. Depression. And sharks.

Three of these topics were obviously relevant. Lots of people I know have struggled with dizziness and fallen; or are working through issues of intimacy or depression. But sharks? I was tempted to skip the shark talk. I have spent literally zero minutes in my life thinking about sharks. I would rather catch up on my emails that hear about sharks. Or so I thought.

Out of respect to the folks who organized the afternoon, I went to the shark lecture. I am glad I did. I was on the edge of my seat the entire time.

The speaker, Greg Skomal, embodied *conviction*. This man believes that sharks are an urgent issue. He dreamed of becoming a shark expert when he was only 12 years old and saw the old Steven Spielberg classic, *Jaws*. He studied marine biology as an undergraduate and in graduate school, and he has studied, pursued, and encountered sharks for more than 30 years. Because he believes that sharks are the most interesting thing in the world, you quickly fall under his spell.

Here is the lesson of this speech for us, one week before Pesach. *What is your shark?* What is it about which you have a deep conviction, and you are going to spend your next 30 years deepening that conviction?

And here is the second speech, which was recently given by Larry Bacow—we know him as Larry, but in his day job he is the President of Harvard—and he was offering remarks at the Kennedy School of Government in the context of a Harvard Gender Equity Summit. He and a colleague were slated to have a dialogue on the role of higher education in expanding economic opportunity. But as he was offering his remarks, students stood up and unfurled banners protesting what they claim to be “Harvard’s complicity in the Prison Industrial Complex.” These activists insist that Harvard divest from any company that supplies private prisons with uniforms, food and the other materials that go into running a prison—which, by the way, is a totally de minimis part of Harvard’s portfolio. Larry pointed out that prisons are not per se immoral, and that civilized nations incarcerate people convicted of crimes. These activists argued that prisons “cage people who have traditionally been oppressed by people of privilege.” The activists

refused to move and continued shouting, as a result of which the whole gathering was disrupted and moved to another, smaller location. This is the first time that this ever happened at Harvard. A conversation about gender equity was hijacked. A president was shouted down.

These activists had their shark. They had conviction. What they did *not* have was civility, humility, and decency.

Thus our challenge, one week before Pesach. How do we have both? How do we have both conviction *and* humility? How can we care about something *deeply*, and listen to and respect others who don't share our point of view?

Now our challenge, to be fair, is harder than it is for the shark expert. After all, there is nothing particularly controversial about sharks. We want to avoid them. All of us can agree on that. Avoid sharks. Check. Anything that Greg Skomal has to say about avoiding sharks would be welcome.

His conviction is not controversial. But what about conviction about Israel, about immigration policy, about socialism, capitalism and economic justice? While 100% of us want to avoid sharks, that unanimity breaks down when we confront these more complicated issues. What do we do?

I want to offer you in this regard a simple, single idea. Can you listen in order to understand, listen without any expectation of persuading the other person? Can you listen out of genuine curiosity and not out of the desire to convert the wrong-headed to your point of view?

Experts in this field of listening call this hitting the bulls-eye. It would look something like this. You talk to somebody about an issue of substance where you see things differently. You say: Please tell me your thinking. You then listen, not to rebut, or to refute, or to contradict, or to prove them wrong. You listen to learn what they think and why. And then you

try to put into your own words everything they just said. Not because *you agree* with what they said, but because *you heard* what they said. To feel heard is a beautiful thing.

This theme of I see you, I hear you, for who you are, and I don't judge you, animates *Kaddish.com*, a novel that just came out by Nathan Englander. The father is an Orthodox Jew. The son is secular. The father davens every day. And the father would appreciate the deeply meaningful gesture of his son saying Kaddish for him. But the son never davens. Kaddish is not his thing. And before he dies, the father says to his son: you are good, just as you are. I love you, just as you are.

After the father dies, the son in fact does *not* say Kaddish for him. The son finds somebody on Kaddish.com to say Kaddish for him. Time goes by. What was the impact of the father's embodying both conviction—he was an Orthodox Jew who davened every day—and humility. He loved his son for who he was.

The son could not bump up against his father's anger, because his father was not angry.

The son could not bump up against his father's judgment, because his father did not judge him.

The son could not bump up against his father's guilt, because his father did not guilt him.

All the son could bump up against was his father's love, because his father loved him, and saw him, and heard him for who he was. All of which inspired his son to go on a spiritual and religious journey in his own time, and in his own way. Years later he found his own deep meaning in living his Jewish life. Non-judgmental love and deep listening make good things grow.

Conviction *and* humility, caring deeply about your own core, listening openly to those who do not share your core, loving generously, that is a powerful combination—for seders, for relationships, and for life. *Chag kasher v'sameakh.*