

Emor: Anti Normalization
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Shabbat Shalom

Last weekend, my son graduated from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. It was a wonderful celebration full of pomp and circumstance (literally), a charge to the graduates, conferral of degrees, and new this year, student protests. The protests were actually quite small. About 20 students stood up and turned their backs when the chancellor spoke. There were boos but I couldn't tell if those were directed at the chancellor or at the protestors. A few students were escorted out of the stadium by police. But in a two-hour ceremony with 8000 graduates, these few moments were just a blip and hardly marred the joy of the occasion.

More concerning to me was what happened in the weeks preceding graduation when Chloe Astrachan, a senior from NYC, went to the encampment. She went holding a sign that said, "Anti-Zionism Is Anti-Semitism." Of course, in that setting, she knew she was being provocative. But the response she got was not the one she expected. She stood there with her sign until two young women wearing neon yellow vests walked up very close to her. They kept inching further into her personal space until she retreated to the top of the library steps.

"No one's allowed to talk to me because of the two girls that are wearing the yellow vests," she lamented. "I'm standing here hoping to have conversations. Maybe we can educate each other a little bit, and all come to a civil conclusion. But if they're not allowed to talk to a Zionist, what are they here doing?"

A few minutes later, a man who had noticed her sign walked up to Astrachan to ask how she processed the loss of life in Gaza. "Do you value human life?" he asked. "Of course, I do," she responded. Thus began a conversation until... the women in the yellow vests approached the man and asked him not to engage with her. "I'm not in your group," he responded and continued the dialogue. (as reported in *The Forward*)

What happened to Chloe Astrachan has been happening on campuses around the country and long before October 7. It is a specific tactic of the anti-Israel, BDS movement referred to as anti-normalization.

Anti-normalization is a policy of many anti-Israel groups to not engage with Jews, Israelis, and others who believe in Israel's right to exist. They think that engaging lends Zionism credibility and they seek to marginalize and suppress the views of Israel supporters. In some cases, the protestors actively try to stop Israeli speakers including academics from presenting. In the case of Chloe, they tried to stifle discussions between individual members of the campus community.

This approach is not limited to American campuses. In Gaza and the West Bank, Palestinians who engage in dialogue with Jews may be threatened or even imprisoned not by Israelis, but by other Palestinians.

That, of course, is bitterly ironic. Israelis and Palestinians are expected to sit down and talk to each other in the pursuit of peace. So, shouldn't their supporters on campus be able to do the same? (Clearly, some of these protestors do not seek peace between Israelis and Palestinians. They seek Israel's destruction.)

Anti-normalization is anything but normal. A university is supposed to be a marketplace of ideas where students grow by encountering challenging topics. Anti-normalization is particularly abnormal for Jews who are a very verbose people! We like to argue and debate, to question and challenge. And we appreciate the power of language to create and to destroy as we see in our parasha.

Our parasha is called Emor which means tell or say. It begins "God *said* to Moses: "Say to the Kohanim and *say* unto them." Three times in the first verse Moshe is told to speak. This *vayomer*, *emor*, *amarta* triple crown is not the Torah's version of free speech. Instead, it introduces an underlying theme of the parasha, a theme that is addressed explicitly at the end of the reading in a story about a blasphemer.

Here is a recap if you missed it: An Israelite committed blasphemy. In the Torah, to blaspheme *vayikov et hashem vayikallel* is to insult or disrespect God. Now, in this passage, it is not clear exactly how they blasphemed. Perhaps they used God's name without proper reverence. Or maybe they directly cursed God. Or maybe they cursed another person using the name of God.

Whatever he did, it must have been really bad as the Torah continues, "any man who blasphemes God shall be put to death. The assembly shall take him out of the encampment and stone him.

I understand that it is not good to curse God. But this is pretty harsh! Luckily, I am not the first to say so or there'd be a whole lot of people getting stoned. Already 2000 years ago, the rabbis restricted the applicability of this law so as to make it entirely theoretical.

Today, no blasphemers are taken out of an encampment to be stoned. Though I get the sense that in the university encampment, many people got stoned- but not of the biblical variety.

Though the law remains theoretical, it still has a lesson for us. The commentary in our chumash explains: "This story of the blasphemer fits Leviticus's commitment to taking words seriously. Words are ephemeral but real and have the power to hurt or to heal. Using the power of speech, with its potential for holiness to hurt another person is a grave offence."

The Torah warns us against words that hurt. But what is happening on campus is a silence that hurts. The anti-normalization approach hurts Israel supporters by ostracizing them. More than that, by stifling discussions, it reduces a very complex situation to a simple binary.

As Rachel Hale, a senior staff writer for the Badger newspaper said, "there's no place on campus for "students who want to have dialogue, students who are pro-Palestine but anti-terrorism, Jewish students who are pro-Israel, but anti-Netanyahu. From what I've observed," she added, "it's been very hard for Jewish students who feel like they might not feel super strongly in one direction to find that in-between gray space."

If you are like me, anti-anti-normalization, you find this tactic entirely unhelpful and unhealthy. If you believe that anti-normalization is the exact opposite of what Jewish tradition would have

us practice, then there is an important corollary we must consider: It goes both ways. If we get offended that anti-Zionists won't talk with us, we must be prepared to actually listen to them. Even if in the end we continue to disagree fervently, perhaps we will have grown in understanding.

Let me be clear. I don't know any Zionists groups that actively practice anti-normalization, groups who refuse to engage the protestors because they don't want to legitimize them. But I do know individual Jews who say they want to have a discussion but who really just want to be heard. That approach leads nowhere constructive.

Though our parsha emphasizes emor, "say to them, say to them, say to them," the calling card of the Jewish people is "shema yisrael," listen, hear, pay attention. Afterall, we were given only one mouth but two ears meaning that if we are truly interested in a conversation, we should listen more than we speak. We should seek to understand more than convince.

Chaverim, God has granted to us the ability to communicate, to convey our most intimate feelings, to discuss complex thoughts. The potential of this gift cannot be overestimated. But productive, two-way conversation on difficult topics must be undertaken mindfully.

It is a lesson of which we are reminded three times a day in the Amidah: elohai ntzur l'shoni meira, usfatei midaber mirma, v'limkalelai nafshi tidom. God guard my tongue from evil and my lips from lies. In the face of those who curse and blaspheme me, may my soul be silent. May I collect my thoughts and respond intentionally so that the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart will be pleasing to You God, yehiu ratzon imrei fi v'hegyon libi lifanekha and may one day, lead us to realize our dream of peace.