



## Sermon Sparks - Legacy Systems

Shabbat Noach (2023)  
By Rabbi Neil F. Blumofe

One of the main challenges of working in the interfaith space is the propensity not to progress beyond platitudes. In very general brush strokes, one can agree with a neighbor and vaguely commit to the world needing to be a better place. In general, we are polite and we all love peace. We usually revel in commonalities – something like: *oh, our text has something similar*, and we find safety and effectiveness in serving food like hummus or other vegetarian options.

Most interfaith work involves showing up for each other -- keeping the bonds of mutual connection warm and dancing within a particular and respectful worldview. Creating strong foundational community is rewarding work. One is a good neighbor and one asks considerate questions. It is the opposite of a disputation. Consensus-building rather than debate. The pursuit of joy rather than the investigation of deep differences. Curiosity rather than coolness.

Having eagerly done this work for more than two decades, I continue to learn about how to do it and what the stakes are. Keeping an open mind and bouncing back after any disappointing encounter are keystones of this work. To be dedicated to interfaith relationships is the opposite of cancel culture. Possessing a generous spirit and radical listening, which entails listening without responding in judgment, are hallmarks of both building trust and measuring what successful relationships looks like. This work is essential for a healthy and worthy civic community. It is the fabric with which our community is knit.

And yet, with any partner, one must be willing to see them as they change and not just how we think they are. The State of Israel is a gamechanger. The fact that there is a Jewish state in the world disrupts what interfaith work is and compels everyone to update their playbook on what is effective work for what is now, and what is merely nostalgia for or a commitment to a world and worldviews that no longer hold.

Here, I am not referring to the so-called Israel-Palestine conflict and current events. I am speaking specifically about attitudes and prejudices that people don't even realize they have. Attitudes that are ingredients in the very DNA of other religions and value systems. Without acknowledging this shift, interfaith work will only go so far and will yield only limited results. We see that now as we continue to grieve, process, and walk together through the latest pogrom against the Jewish people. In addition to over 1400 people who were murdered in the worst attack against Jews since the Holocaust, there are now over 200 people from various nations kept as hostages, as prisoners to be used as collateral in an intractable and tragic conflict.

Unfortunately, Judaism has an app, a mechanism for recovering hostages which is almost as old as our traditions themselves. In Hebrew, the redemption of captives is known as *pidyon shvuyim*. The release of any captive taken by robbers, imprisoned



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unjustly by authorities, or captured by slave traders is usually secured by paying a ransom which is organized by the Jewish community. *Pidyon shvuyim* is not a small matter. Our sages call this action of redeeming captives a *mitzvah rabbah*, or a great and important mitzvah.

The medieval sage Maimonides teaches that redeeming captives is more important even than feeding or clothing those who need immediate assistance. He cites many verses in the Tanach to prove this position. There are opinions in the Talmud stating that to be a hostage is worse even than starvation and death and our rabbinic codes caution that every moment when one delays in freeing those who are bound, in cases where it is possible to expedite their freedom, is considered akin to murder.

Of course, there are specific limitations of this mitzvah that our sages discuss. Namely, how much is an individual life worth and will paying an exorbitant ransom incentivize an increase in hostage taking? For me, these are not questions of today. These discussions are part of a legacy system – a system that needs a refresh. The principles of *pidyon shvuyim* were built and formulated in times when Jews held no real power. Jews were always subject to dominant systems of control which were unpredictable, with others acting in their own self-interest. Jews did not have agency. Rather, Jews were acted upon.

The State of Israel changed this metric. As that nation of Israel grew in stature, especially in the last 40 years, the power dynamics changed. Paying money for those who are captured was no longer the only response available. Jews were no longer powerless and bound to work with other entities to organize the release of abducted members of our community. Fighting back became an option.

This was a profound sea change in the dynamics of both politics and religious stances, even though some don't recognize this shift. The strength of the State of Israel positively impacts all of us living in the Diaspora as well. It is a great advantage, a blessing, to live as a Jew in this world knowing that the State of Israel interrupts the sustained and unceasing pattern of either random or organized violence against Jews. Jews will no longer be thrown out of countries, exiled, or seen as a benighted remnant of a false doctrine by those in power. This is certainly not to say that antisemitism, or anti-Judaism doesn't exist. Rather, the ability that Jews have to defend themselves should shift long worn attitudes about who Jews are in the world. While I have enjoyed much of my interfaith work, there is a consistent thread of paternalism that I am subject to when I speak about and represent a proud and dynamic Judaism.

I am not an apologist for the State of Israel; rather, I am a strong supporter of its right to exist in, flourish, and impact our world. This statement, believe it or not, this is disconcerting to some, right off the bat. And while there are catastrophic political angles to this, one should also realize that hostile attitudes towards Israel and Jewish people is



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also borne from religious stances and the fears that other longstanding hegemonic presences, attitudes, or beliefs will be displaced. The return of strength to the Jewish people is a severing of a system which has sometimes tolerated but not ever seen Jews since the destruction of the Temple almost 2000 years ago – and if we are more exacting, Jews really haven't been seen since the overthrow and arrest of King Zedekiah by the Babylonians way back in 586 BCE.

Currently, there are more than 200 precious souls confined in the dungeons of Gaza. For sure, if given a chance more wanton murders, crimes against humanity, and violations of human rights would continue by terrorists who are committed to extreme acts of violence and the extermination of Jews – not just Israelis. We need to bring these hostages home now. This is a priority and should be a cry that all people who love human rights should be shouting from the rooftops. We need to eliminate the threats of these massacres and violations from ever happening again. Indeed, the State of Israel was built on this promise. Never again. Never again will Jews have to live in numbing fear. Never again, will Jews be exposed in a maelstrom of danger. Adhering to the old ways of *pidyon hashvuyim* is no longer the only way to do things. The heroic rescue at Entebbe in 1976 was a heroic glimpse into this future. Exchanging over 1000 prisoners for one precious soul as Israel did in 2011 for Gilad Shalit is one way of responding to hostage taking – however, it is not the only option.

We have the power to protect ourselves and we should use it. There are other hostages in Gaza as well – Palestinians who are threatened by Hamas. At certain rallies there is a counter move lately by supporters of Israel to add to the chant, Palestine will be free – the counter-protesters add the words: from Hamas. These bleak, agonizing events demand imagination and cooperation. It is very heartening to see our president realize this and to support the right of a vibrant and traumatized Jewish state to defend itself and its citizens. I ask others who are in positions of influence to think about their Jewish neighbors as real people – not just as supporting actors in other narratives or complicit characters in passion plays.

We can help update very old perceptions of what Jews should be in this world. We can live proudly and unafraid. We must continue to learn and educate ourselves about our history and continue to practice our traditions proudly. We are to call out hypocrisy and gently and persistently reframe damaging attitudes, as unconscious as they may be in our friends and community members. We must name structural bias and erasure of our identity. We can learn a lot from those who teach how to be antiracist. We can teach others how to be antiantisemitic and how to be antianti-Zionist – although this vital work needs better names and more strategies.

As rabbis, we need to update our religious understanding of *pidyon hashvuyim*, factoring in the might of the State of Israel. While the author Dara Horn teaches that people love dead Jews, we can strive to be seen while we are alive, in this haunted present. For me,



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thinking about the impact of all of this realizing the root causes of Jew-hatred has been astonishing. We are all operating in outdated modalities. Even the most strident, atheist critic of Israel has their attitudes formed by the making of the sacred texts of religions that if we are being honest, sought to undermine, delegitimize, and replace Judaism. This might be unwitting, but it's real. These religious texts are the backbone of Western civilization, including political theory and epistemology.

As an invested and committed religious Jew I say there is new halacha to be made. We are no longer vulnerable apologists for those who don't value or respect us. We no longer have to pay our way out of difficult situations. We do not need to express remorse that we want to live. This is our moral obligation. We choose life and once we are safe we must work for the safety of others who want to live in peace with us. The road is long, but we must not despair. As is common in Israel now, people are saying to each other – and we will say it also: *yachad nenatze'ach. Together we will prevail.*

Am Yisrael Chai.  
Shabbat Shalom.