Lions Not Sheep?

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Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple

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This past summer, Alyson and I took the boys on what I believe was one of the most remarkable trips we've ever been on. We flew into Denver and then drove from park to park hitting places like Custer State Park, Mount Rushmore, The Crazy Horse Memorial, the Badlands, Yellowstone, and the Grand Tetons. On the way we saw where the Oregon Trail and the Pony Express routes passed through Caspar, Wyoming. We also had a meal or two at Buffalo Bill's Irma Hotel and went to a real rodeo in Cody, Wyoming. I'll be honest, that rodeo was more fun than I was expecting it to be. Just ask Matthew about what happened to one of the bull riders, he'll have a story for you. Don't worry, no person or animal was hurt, but maybe an ego was bruised.

There was one stop, though, that I just can't get out of my head. While in Cody, we felt it was tremendously important to take our kids to see one of the many WWII Japanese internment camps. This one was just 13 miles outside of town and we felt that as Jews, particularly Jews living in America right now, there was no excuse for us not to go.

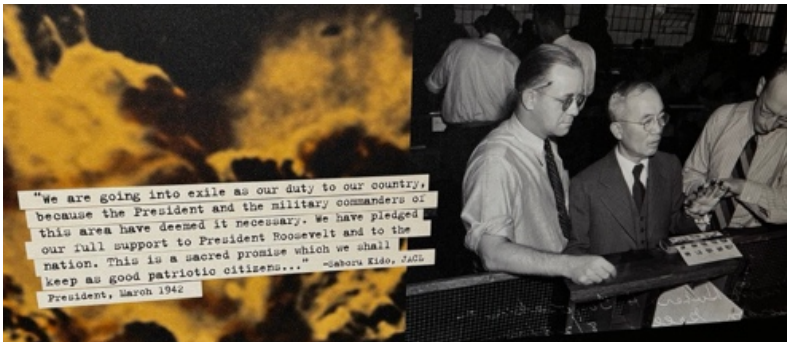
The day started off with us going to the Buffalo Bill Museum. There were all types of entertaining displays about Buffalo Bill. The museum itself was fun and lively, breaming with visitors. The kids were running from exhibit to exhibit. That afternoon we took them to the internment camp… what a stark difference. We drove from a bustling little town to the outskirts. The little shops and wild west regalia stores started to melt away and were replaced by open fields and pastures. And then after about 10 minutes on a straight away with nothing to the left or right for miles around, there was a small sign for the museum indicating this was our turn. We almost missed it.

We drove for another mile and went over a hill and then spotted a solitary building. As we pulled in, we saw that their massive parking lot was empty except for one car. We parked and as we walked through the museum doors a sweet polite woman, who seemed shocked to see us, popped out of her seat to welcome us.

The first building, the one we were in, was down below at the bottom of a hill. This was the museum. The camp was up top on the other side of a ridge as if deliberately placed out of sight from the rest of the world so that our country's sin could remain hidden. The museum had artifacts and letters as well as a video that explained how an internment camp could come to be in America. Of how people would willingly get on a train and leave everything behind and how soldiers would be willing to detain fellow citizens without due process.

At one point during the video a soldier was reminiscing on his time as a guard and said, "We swore an oath to this country, to our constitution, and then we were told that these people were the enemy and that to protect our nation we needed to stand guard over them. And then we got to know them and looking back we realized that we were like sheep blindly following orders without thinking about whether they were orders that should have been followed to begin with."

The movie ended and then a door in the back of the theater opened into the rest of the museum. It was filled with countless relics and documents about what happened. If the Buffalo Bill Museum was about the frivolity and playfulness of life, this was about the human capacity to objectify others. There was one image that caught my eye. It was a photo of a Japanese American man being fingerprinted and next to this mild-mannered man was a quote that read, "We are going into exile as our duty to our country, because the President and the military commanders of this area have deemed it necessary. We have pledged our full support to President Roosevelt and to the nation. This is a sacred promise which we shall keep as good patriotic citizens…"



We then left the museum and went up to the camp site. The only things that remain of it were two dormitories, a crematorium as well as the footprint of the main hall. They warned us not to go into the dormitories because there was dangerous exposed asbestos.

The next day we drove to Yellowstone National Park. In the park you see people from every walk of life and every political background just enjoying nature. It was wonderful to be in such beautiful landscapes, and to also be out of reach from the internet and all the hostilities of the world. We went on days of hikes and exploration. The natural beauty was just breathtaking. I also enjoyed the people watching and meeting new individuals.

While walking around the Mammoth Hot Springs Trail we passed someone who was wearing a shirt that caught my eye. It read simply, “Lions not Sheep!” and nothing more. Instantly I was taken back to the internment camp. Soldier and citizen both acting righteously and with pride but both acting like sheep. I shook off the thought and tried to get a photo of the shirt, but it was too late. I had never seen the shirt before, and I kept looking for it but never saw it again. I googled the phrase, and it seems to be a slogan that a couple of extreme right-wing groups use to speak about their devotion to the former President and their loathing of the current one. I spent the rest of the day thinking about the metaphors of lions and sheep.

On Yom Kippur we ask God to forgive our sins, but our liturgy and Rabbinic tradition reminds us time and again that Yom Kippur only helps us atone for sins committed between us and God, not between one another. That we need to wrestle and struggle with our actions and ask forgiveness for what we have done wrong. Like when the guard at the internment camp sought out his prisoners so that he could beg for and receive their forgiveness.

There’s another level here when thinking about our actions. The key to it lies in our *vidui* prayers, our confessional prayers. The *vidui* prayers are all written in the plural. For the wrongs *we* have committed. We need to take an inventory of how we as a society are faring towards one

another. And what I am seeing are a lot of people confusing self-righteousness for righteousness. I'm thinking about the social justice campus warriors who are chanting "From the river to the sea" but have no idea what river or what sea or think that blocking Jewish students from getting to class will somehow stop a conflict in the Middle East.

I see people so stuck in their beliefs that when they watch footage that Hamas themselves took and distributed of they themselves committing horrible acts of violence and rape that they can't accept it and just declare it to be Zionist propaganda. This is slightly different then the individuals who understand and know outright that the origins of phrases like "from the river to the sea" or a "global intifada" mean the eradication of the State of Israel and the death of all Jews.

Do I believe that all these campus protesters are antisemitic? No. It is not antisemitic to stand up for innocent Palestinians, call for a ceasefire, and beg for the reduction of civilian casualties. However, it's something else altogether to applaud and celebrate Hamas as righteous warriors despite knowing full well that Hamas and their leader Sinwar call for the death of all Jews and will stop at nothing to achieve it. At one point in time Sinwar even confessed that he didn't care how many Palestinians die if it meant an end to Israel.[i]

Anti-Zionism truly is the new antisemitism, and we are seeing it play out with a rise in antisemitic incidents post-October 7th. According to the FBI in 2023 there was a 63% increase in antisemitic hate crime to a record breaking 1,832 recorded criminal incidents.[ii] The Anti-Defamation League's numbers are higher because they record both criminal and non-criminal incidents. They reported 8873 incidents in 2023 representing a 140% increase from the previous year.

These incidents include things like protestors going after people for just wearing kippot[iii], or the protest that entered the subway calling for Zionists to identify themselves.[iv] Or when an employee of a bookstore cancels a book talk and signing because the presenters believe that Israel has a right to exist. A recording surfaced where she talked of how proud she was in banning "Zionist Jews" from the store.[v] These are not actions that are aimed at minimizing the death of innocent life in Gaza, they are just antisemitic through and through.

One can certainly critic what Israel is doing and not be antisemitic. Israelis are doing it every day. When I was in Israel in March I spoke with a lot of people, with family members of hostages, like Alon's family, and with people who had lost relatives. I don't think I came across one person who thought Netanyahu was doing a swell job and was handling the conflict correctly. But there is a difference between a legitimate critic of Netanyahu and blatant antisemitism.

When we were walking through the internment camp, and we saw how easy it was to objectify another human being. I thought about the college encampments and the cases I just mentioned. I thought about the insurrection on January 6th, and I thought about Charlottesville and "Jews will not replace us." I thought about all the animosity we feel towards one another and I thought that if we aren't really careful something like this internment camp could easily happen again.

On one of our last days of the trip, we woke up to the news that the 6 hostages who included Hersh Goldberg-Polin were found dead. Our hearts ached and we felt the need to be with others who were going through similar pain. We went to the center of town in Jackson, Wyoming and met up with a Wyoming for Israel gathering. This group had people from every background, faith, and political ideology, gathering in support of Israel. There wasn't a police presence. There weren't protests. There were just people trying to support one another. It was cathartic to be with that mix of people. It felt good to sing *Oseh Shalom* with everyone, although I think our east coast accents were throwing some people off.

After the gathering I went up to the Chabad Rabbi who organized the event, and we chatted for a bit. We spoke about how good it was to dwell together and how the extremes of society are making it harder to do that. How those groups represent, maybe, the 10 yards on

either side of a football field. Most people represent all the turf in-between those two ends. But it's hard to score, it's hard to get anything done, if you have to go through them first.

Lions and sheep…Perhaps there is a better animal to strive for? Perhaps the wise owl. Perhaps we should strive to be more like the guard at the camp who paused long enough to meet his captive and learn who they were. But it's hard to do that with all the boundaries we put up.

As I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, my wife, Alyson, is an Assistant Director at The Union for Reform Judaism's Crane Lake Camp. The camp means the world to our family it is, after all, where Alyson I met and got married. I love what the camp does for our children and how much they look forward to going every summer. Beyond all the activities, I think they love going because one of the many things the camp does really well is foster a culture of kindness. It is the core of their identity. It was so refreshing to visit on the weekends and spend some time in a community that lives and breathes the principle that one should always assume good intent and when you speak with people, even if it's to tell them some difficult truths, it should always be done in a kind way. To me, that's a sacred community.

But I'm a realist and I know what some of you are thinking right now, "isn't there a place where I need to draw the line?" And the answer is yes. Even though our tradition believes that multiple and at times contradictory things can be true in the same moment it doesn't also mean that there aren't things that are just wrong. Inciting violence and pain, rhetoric and behavior that exponentially raises the amount of antisemitism and xenophobia around us. These ideologies must be decried, must be fought, and must not be tolerated. The difficulty we face is twofold, the first is having the courage to do so, the second is knowing where that line must be drawn.

Earlier this week I had a moment that seemed a little surreal to me. You see I was invited to small group meeting of Jewish leaders in New Jersey to meet with the House Minority Leader, Hakeem Jefferies. It was the morning of October 7th and he wanted to meet with us, I guess on his way down to DC, to twist our ears about antisemitism in America and hear from us on how we're doing a year later. At one point while we were discussing the rise of antisemitism, he said something that brought me back to the internment camp. He labeled himself as a Zionist telling us that he has visited Israel more than any other country in the world and that during one of his many visits he met with the German Ambassador. The Ambassador brought up that Germany has something that America doesn't that serves as a safeguard against antisemitism (that is aside

from their lack of a 1st Amendment) and it's that they have a culture of remembrance in a way that we don't. They have a culture of remembering shame. They make it a practice to remember the horrors they caused. They lean into it as a way of being able to move forward and prevent future catastrophes. That they won't tolerate people ignoring their past or pretending it didn't happen, kind of like us trying to ignore the fact that we had internment camps. There are boundaries to what is acceptable to say and what is not.

It is a tricky thing to have room for others but also have a boundary. Are the boundaries we draw, are the actions we take, are they born out of true righteousness as taught by our faith and our tradition, or are they born out of a sense of self-righteousness that only serves our wants and desires and lets us objectify others with greater ease? *Yesh ahavah, v'yesh gvul*. There is love, but there is also a limit. Let us work for a time where we live in a world that has the proper balance of both and not just boundaries. – Amen

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[i] https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-04-13/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/i-asked-sinwar-is-it-worth-10-000-gazans-dying-he-said-even-100-000-is-worth-it/0000018e-d40a-d5ed-adcf-f79af56c0000
[ii] https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/hate-crime
[iii] https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/antisemitism-jewish-man-spit-on-in-manhattan-nypd/
[iv] https://apnews.com/article/palestinian-protest-new-york-zionist-subway-0178ea10bf0f53b6b9e33505f0514eab
[v] https://www.jta.org/2024/08/23/ideas/what-i-learned-when-a-brooklyn-bookstore-canceled-a-discussion-of-judaism-over-my-zionism