Wrestling with a Vitriolic Society
Rabbi Philip Bazeley
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
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Earlier this year as Delaney Hall, the private detention center in Newark, was opening I decided to go up and join with others to protest its opening. I believe strongly based in Jewish tradition and history that we are to care for the vulnerable and for the stranger who lives amongst us. There are appropriate times for detention and deportation and there are times when they are inappropriate. And what I went there to protest was inappropriate detention and deportation that was blind and devoid of humanity.

But I also went to Newark with the curiosity to see if this protest was a place where I, as a Jew could dwell. I had heard that protests across the state had now become rife with anti-Israel rhetoric. I knew the organizers had committed to making sure that Israel would not be mentioned in any of the formal comments or regalia, but it was also an open public protest. What was I going to find?

As I was getting ready I made sure that I was wearing my "bring the hostages home" dog tags as well as a yellow ribbon, of course along with my *kipah*. When the protest started, I found myself around kindred souls. But within a minute or two Palestinian flags started coming out and I noticed that I was being used as a prop. Photographers were constantly trying to move around to get a photo of the rabbi in front of a Palestinian flag. I kept moving to avoid any line of sight until I eventually found myself on the other side of the cameras and no longer part of the protest. It felt very interesting to me to be both an insider and an outsider at the same time. I ended up watching protest, from an outsider's perspective. It was loud all around me but I was stuck in the silence of my thoughts thinking about the world that we were in and how black and white we've become.

It feels, more and more, like we are living in a society addicted to vitriol. Turn on the television, scroll through your phone, or overhear a conversation at the coffee shop—it seems like everyone is shouting, nobody is listening, and the louder you yell the more convinced you are that you are right.

We are constantly asked to pick sides—on politics, on Israel, on culture, on nearly everything. And not only pick a side, but defend it with absolute loyalty. To question, to hesitate, to express nuance is to risk being accused of betrayal.

And yet, as Jews, we are heirs to a tradition that resists this kind of binary thinking. Judaism teaches us to dwell in nuance, to seek complexity, to hold multiple truths in tension. Our Torah and our rabbinic tradition refuse to let us flatten life into simple categories.

Our tradition teaches us that all people are created *b'tzelem Elohim*—in the image of God. That divine spark burns in the heart of a grieving Jewish grandmother in Kfar Aza. And it burns in a Palestinian child in Rafah. If we can't grieve for the suffering of innocents—on both sides—then

something in us has gone numb. Something vital has been shut down. And we must return to ourselves.

I believe in protest. I believe in civil disobedience. I believe in standing up for the vulnerable. But I also believe in looking with clear eyes.

Because when I listen closely—when I watch the footage, read the signs—I feel my stomach twist.

I see "From the river to the sea" chanted alongside "No more deportations." I see posters that condemn ICE right next to posters that praise Hamas. I see slogans that don't just critique Israeli policy—they deny the right of Israel to exist. They erase Jewish peoplehood.

And I think: How did we get here? How did we get to a world that seems incapable of dealing with complexity?

Too often, instead of living with complexity, we retreat into simplicity. We divide the world into camps: us and them, righteous and evil, worthy and unworthy. Psychologists call this *splitting*—the refusal to tolerate contradiction, the insistence that one side holds the whole truth while the other holds none. But life isn't that simple. Judaism has never been that simple.

We are living in a time when the temptation to *other* each other is overpowering. When we erase the humanity of those we disagree with, violence begins to feel justified. When we say only our pain counts, only our story is true, we abandon the very idea of covenant—that we are responsible for one another.

Tonight, I want to explore how Judaism offers us an antidote to the vitriol of our society and it's by rejecting the binary and cultivating the courage for nuance.

Let us begin with Abraham.

In Genesis 18, God reveals to Abraham the plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. And Abraham does something audacious—he argues with God. *"Will You sweep away the innocent with the guilty?"* he demands. *"What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will You spare it? What if there are forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten?"*

Abraham does not accept a simple binary—Sodom is wicked, therefore it must be destroyed. He pushes for nuance. He insists that even in a place of great evil, there may still be sparks of righteousness. He forces us to see that moral life is not about easy divisions between the good guys and the bad guys, but about searching for justice in the gray spaces.

In a time when our society demands blanket judgments—*all of them are wrong, all of them are right*—Abraham models for us a different way: courageously engaging complexity, insisting that truth requires nuance.

Abraham's grandson, Jacob, gives us another paradigm. On the night before meeting his estranged brother Esau, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious figure—some say an angel, some say a manifestation of his own fear, some even say God. He wrestles until dawn, refusing to let go until he receives a blessing.

From this moment, Jacob is renamed *Yisrael*—the one who wrestles with God. That name becomes our collective identity: the Jewish people, *Am Yisrael*.

To be Jewish, then, is to wrestle. To refuse to accept easy answers. To live in tension, to engage the struggle, to keep asking even when no neat solution is offered. This is the opposite of vitriol. Vitriol ends the conversation. Wrestling demands that it continue.

The rabbis of the Talmud embody this value.

Open a page of Talmud and you will not find a single voice. You will find layers of disagreement: *Rabbi Akiva says… Rabbi Yishmael says…* Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai argue back and forth. And rarely does the text silence one opinion. Both are recorded. Both are preserved.

Why? Because our tradition insists that wisdom emerges from dialogue, not monologue. Pirkei Avot teaches: *"Who is wise? One who learns from every person."* Not only from the people who agree with you. Not only from the voices that affirm your side. Every person.

In fact, the Talmud in Eruvin 13b tells us that both Hillel and Shammai are "words of the living God." Both. Even though they contradict one another. Truth in Judaism is not singular—it is multi-vocal. It lives in the sacred clash of perspectives.

Imagine if our political discourse, or even our family conversations, carried this spirit—preserving multiple voices, honoring disagreement as holy, resisting the urge to erase complexity.

Rejecting the Binary

This is not easy. Binary thinking is seductive. It feels safer to say: *I am entirely right, and you are entirely wrong.* It gives us clarity, certainty, belonging.

But binaries flatten humanity. They deny the image of God in the other person. They turn neighbors into enemies.

The rabbis distinguished between two kinds of arguments: *machloket l'shem shamayim*—an argument for the sake of heaven, and *machloket she-lo l'shem shamayim*—an argument not for heaven. The first, they say, endures. The second doesn't.

Arguments for the sake of heaven are those that wrestle with nuance, that seek truth, that respect the dignity of those involved. Arguments not for heaven are those meant only to wound, to win, to destroy.

Our society is addicted to the second kind of argument. But Judaism calls us to the first.

Think of the debates raging in our world right now.

On Israel and Gaza, people demand: *Are you pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian?* But Jewish tradition says: you can love Israel and grieve for Palestinians. You can call for the return of hostages and demand humanitarian relief. To insist on nuance here is not weakness. It is fidelity to truth.

On American politics, the same dynamic appears: *Are you all-in for one party or the other?* But reality is more complicated. Judaism teaches us to weigh policies against our values, to celebrate what is good and critique what is unjust—no matter whose side it comes from. Judaism is our religion, not the American political system.

Even in our personal lives, binary thinking creeps in: *You are either with me or against me. You either agree with me completely or I cut you out.* But Torah reminds us that we are bound in covenant to one another, even across difference.

So what does this mean for us here at Anshe Emeth?

It means our synagogue must be a sanctuary for complexity. A place where it is safe to say: *I don't know.* Or: *I feel both grief and pride.* Or: *I need to listen more before I decide.*

It means we model for our children that strength is not certainty but curiosity. That wisdom is not knowing all the answers but asking better questions.

And it means we refuse to mirror the vitriol of the wider world. We will not shout each other down. We will not reduce each other to caricatures. We will honor each other's dignity even in disagreement.

This is not just a political stance. It is a spiritual discipline. It is what it means to be *Am Yisrael*—the people who wrestle with God, with truth, with one another.

What do we do in this moment of impossible tension?

We hold it.
We hold it all.

We teach ourselves that Judaism doesn't ask us to choose between compassion and complexity. It asks us to live with both.

To *weep* and to *laugh*.
To *criticize* and to *defend*.
To *celebrate* and to *grieve*.

It means creating a community where people can cry—cry for Israelis, cry for Palestinians, cry for migrants, cry for hostages—and not be shamed for any of it. It means holding ground for

conservatives and progressives to come together and have debates *l'shem shamayim*—for the sake of heaven—and then still hug each other, still show up for each other's *simchahs* and *shivahs.*

It means raising our children to be proud Jews who see the divine in every face.

It means refusing to choose between being American and being Jewish. Between justice and self-preservation. Between love and critique. And to do so with the courage of having hope. Because to be Jewish is to choose hope.

Hope that the hostages will come home.
Hope that Israelis and Palestinians will one day live in dignity and peace.
Hope that we can model a different way—rooted in truth, rooted in justice, rooted in compassion, rooted in memory.

Friends, nuance is not easy. It takes courage to resist the binary. It takes humility to admit that no side has a monopoly on truth. It takes patience to listen to voices we disagree with.

But this is our calling. This is our gift to the world.

In a society addicted to vitriol, we will be healers of dialogue. In a culture of binaries, we will insist on nuance. In a world of shouting, we will model listening.

This is what it means to walk in the footsteps of Abraham, who argued with God for justice; of Jacob, who wrestled all night for a blessing; of Hillel and Shammai, who taught us that even disagreement can be holy.

May we, too, have the courage to wrestle, the humility to listen, and the strength to dwell in complexity so that next year we may find that we have fostered a world worthy of God's presence.

Amen