

Shabbat Parashat Mikeitz 5784
When Noa Tishby Came to Beth El
Rabbi David Englander

On Tuesday night pretty much right where I'm standing, Beth El's own Sid Brown conducted a masterful interview of one of Israel's most popular and well-regarded spokespeople, Noa Tishby, an event organized and implemented by our Jewish Federation. Everyone in attendance - and there were some 900 on-site - learned something and also were reminded of some essential truths about connecting to Israel at this challenging time. I want to share two of my takeaways and to connect each of them to themes from this week's incredibly dramatic parasha of Mikeitz, drama to be outdone perhaps only by next week's parasha when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers after testing them to see if they had grown and changed since he last saw them. That last view, of course, was from the depths of the pit into which they had thrown him, or perhaps from the caravan of Ishamaelite traders to whom they had sold him as a slave, assuming that he would never survive the experience.

The first takeaway that is as much of a reminder and affirmation as it is something new is first taught in the early part of our parasha. Joseph is in prison, having offended his employer Potiphar. There he interprets dreams of a butler and a baker and does so correctly. But the prisoner who is released back to Pharaoh's service forgets Joseph and is only reminded about him when the palace is in a frenzy to find someone who can interpret the monarch's strange dreams about cows and ears of corn. Suddenly, the butler who had met and benefitted from Joseph's dreamworks in prison,

decides to save the day and perhaps to curry some favor by doing so. Listen closely to how he suggests he may know a guy who can help.

“The chief cupbearer then spoke up and said to Pharaoh, “I must make mention today of my offenses. Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and placed me in custody in the house of the chief steward, together with the chief baker. We had dreams the same night, he and I, each of us w dream with a meaning of its own. V’sham itanu na’ar Ivri - There with us was a Hebrew youth, a servant of the chief steward; and when we told him our dreams, he interpreted them for us, telling each of the meaning of his dream.” In the very next sentence, Pharaoh himself sent for Joseph, who was rushed up from the dungeon, cleaned up, and presented to Pharaoh.

Why does the baker throw in that detail - na’ar ivri? Why not just v’sham itanu na’ar, there with us was a youth? Did he think the prison administration would not be able to find him in the Egyptian prison system? For the baker to add this description, and for the Torah to record it, as students and readers we sense that there is something else going on.

And what is going on is that Joseph never hid his identity while he was in Egypt. He seems not to have thought about whether it would have been safer for him to try to do so, instead always giving full credit for his fate and skill as a dreamcatcher to God, with no observable attempt made to hide his faith or identity. It is possible this was noticeable to others anyway, but it is also very possible that that option of being public about this core aspect of his identity or sublimating it to save himself presented itself. Joseph is known for many things - dream interpretation, economic policy, resilience

through unimaginably difficult trials - but perhaps one thing he should be known for among these more famous details is his refusal to give up or hide his Israelite identity either when times were difficult or when they were more hopeful.

Noa Tishby reminded us that it is very difficult to change the mind of an anti-Semite - holding them accountable for illegal actions or words that could incite violence may be the best case scenario, all of this while balancing the right to free speech on which we all rely. But what we can do to push back against that darkness is to light our Jewish lights, which is why public menorah lightings were so important this year, which is why, as Noa reminded us, taking pride in our Judaism, not being intimidated, and like Joseph, not hiding unless there is a verifiably good reason to do so and then only temporarily, is one thing that is within our control, and one thing we all have to consider strongly and act on with confidence and mutual strength.

You'll recall from our parasha that Pharaoh sent for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men and called on all of them to interpret his dreams and none of them could. What was so difficult - was it the cows or the corn or the lack of change of appearance? There seems to be something that stymies them about these dreams such that not even one attempt at explanation is recorded. Here's what I think confused them. When Joseph hears the dream he has a very Israelite, a very Jewish response. He interprets not just for what the dream means today, but for what it means over the next fourteen years at least. This time horizon was beyond the scope of the magicians and wise men of Pharaoh, probably more

interested in pleasing their boss with immediate good news he would like to hear than looking or planning ahead.

The moment a collective gasp was heard in this room on Tuesday night was when Sid asked Noa how long she thought the war would go on and she said at least a year. This was verified just yesterday as it was reported that Israel's defense minister told the visiting Jake Sullivan that the mission of separating Gaza from Hamas would take many months. Everyone would prefer a faster timeline but there is no shortcut to the necessary end result of the tragic and dangerous situation Israel has been placed in. Joseph taught Egypt the necessity of looking most of a generation into the future. Israel seems to be peering beyond its immediate future as well as it seeks to make sure what happened on October 7th cannot happen again. As Noa Tishby also said, Israel's enemies are watching how it responds and a softer response could have been seen as an open invitation for others to copy what was done. In the short and long term, that would be completely unacceptable.

It is not always so easy to look beyond immediate needs and concerns. It is critical that we do and our tradition helps to peer both back into the past for inspiration and to seek to plot a course toward a fulfilling future, not just for ourselves but for those who will come after us. Holding firm to our Jewish identities and expressing our commitments as strongly as we are able, by building and participating in wonderful communities such as this one, affirming Jewish practices and values in our homes, and advocating for Israel all help us to see our lives not just for what they are but also for how we will impact lives are either just starting or have not even begun yet.

From our commitments to Israel's sacrifice, Joseph-like we embrace who we are without hesitation, and look to a time of peace and fulfillment that might seem far away, but which we navigate toward as hopefully as we possibly can.

Shabbat shalom.