

Shabbat Parashat Pekudei 5784
Rabbi David Englander
“The Oscar (Does Not) Go To”

I don't get to many movies which is why the Oscars broadcast is usually something that I don't pay much attention to. I did see Oppenheimer and thought it was pretty great and so I guess I wasn't surprised by how well it did at this annual award spectacle. But like you my attention was diverted to where we did not really want it to be diverted to, specifically the red hands pin people were wearing which, to paraphrase another movie, does not mean what they think it means. And our attention was also diverted to an acceptance speech that has created quite a necessary stir as well.

That speech, by filmmaker Jonathan Glazer, director of the award-winning Holocaust movie *The Zone of Interest*, received more attention than even John Cena walking on stage seemingly with no clothes. Mr. Glazer is not here so there is really no need for me to condemn the message he seemed to be trying to deliver during his moment in the spotlight, but I do want to see if we can unpack what was so upsetting to so many of us about his words, and in so doing affirm some of the core values and ideas that we have been seeking to represent as a Jewish community since but also well before October 7th.

The part of the short talk that was not emphasized included this quote: “Our film shows where dehumanization leads at its worst.” That much is correct - the Holocaust was humanity's ultimate act of dehumanization. I've been reminded of this recently while reading the excellent book *The Escape Artist*, whose every page is a reminder of the ways our grandparents and now their parents were seen as less than human by their oppressors. Had the talk stopped there I might have thought he was going to talk about how the victims of October 7th had been dehumanized and maybe even the many ways Israel continues to guard against treating even its enemies as less than human, even if too many of them continue to stand ready to do that toward us. But that of course was not his point, and he went on.

He used the words “Right now, we stand here as men who refute their Jewishness” and that got a lot of attention because while it was inartful and not careful it has also been taken out of context. They did not refute their

Jewishness, which is a controversial and difficult topic at best but let's at least be among those who object to what was said as it was said and not to a fragment of a sentence. Because the full quote is "We stand here as men who refute their Jewishness and the Holocaust being hijacked by an occupation". In other words, don't equate my Jewishness with the Israeli occupation of non-Israelis. And, it seems, he was saying "as a Jew I denounce any reference to the Holocaust as something that animates and gives purpose to Israel's existence" - such a statement is foreign to him. The implied accusation is that the Holocaust and preventing another one is being used as an excuse by Israel for the scope of the current war, and he finds that to be unacceptable.

Most in this room would agree that he was wrong on both counts. As for the Occupation, Israel left Gaza in 2005, offered Palestinians a fair deal for a state many times and was rejected, and on October 7th we saw what can happen as a result of having an armed neighbor that is sworn to your destruction. All of that is reason enough to disagree with the tone, content, and underlying theme of this so-called acceptance speech. But what can we learn from it?

Just as we call out and object to those who seemingly refuse to do anything but blindly and unquestioningly follow someone who says 'wear these red hands, it shows you are against violence' so too are we all called on to be as educated and well-versed in something that is not very well practiced today. And that is seeking knowledge beyond headlines, commitments built on a foundation of reality, and not turning away from saying, doing, and advocating for what we stand for just because it can sometimes be difficult to do that.

In that there is a strong Purim connection, which quickly approaches. If anything, this early spring holiday teaches that some courage in the face of adversity and threat, best represented by Esther and emulated throughout every era of Jewish history, is still a real and present need. Haman referred to the Jews as a destructive force in the kingdom and almost got away with it. It took Esther's courage to say no, it is you who seek to destroy us that is the truth and not the other way around. Hopefully our misaligned world and some of those with cameras and microphones on them will finally see this conflict for what it is and not for what they seem to want it to be.

Israel is not “using the Holocaust as an excuse” to fight a necessary war. But the shadow of Never Again is part of Israel’s very life force, its promise that Jews anywhere in the world and most of all in Israel will never again be defenseless in the face of threat or onslaught. Israel is not only an answer to those who would seek Jewish destruction - but it is also that. Contrary to a momentary and likely soon forgotten speech at the Oscars, the work of Israel, our partnership with Israel, our Purim-like determination for Jewish lives to be valued, and our and everyone’s safety to be equally assured, is ongoing.

Sometimes a controversy can have the unexpected effect of motivating even stronger dedication to important priorities. We would have preferred a filmmaker would have said thank you for this award and sat down, but instead we got a reminder to be attentive, informed, and secure in our commitments to the Jewish present, and the Jewish future. So much has happened in these last five months and so much is yet possible. As always we will seek to create that better tomorrow by living out our commitments and values every day, including on this beautiful Shabbat we are privileged to experience together.

Shabbat shalom.