

My favorite bumper sticker from the beginning of the early 2000s was one I saw after the start of the second gulf War. It said, "I love my country, but I think we should start seeing other people." I thought it was so clever, and so poignant. "Seeing other people," in the context of relationship, is considered betrayal, and indeed those protesting the war were being accused of unloyalty. On the other hand, the simple meaning of the words, "seeing there people," the ability to acknowledge the basic existence and right to existence of others, is the kind of humanity whose lack the author of that bumper sticker was so pointedly protesting.

I have been thinking about that bumper sticker a great deal this week, in relation to both of the countries that have a claim on me, the United States and Israel. In both cases, I love many things about these countries, including the land, many of the people, the language, the aspirations, and the gifts they have given me. With regard to both of these countries, I was raised to think of them both as exceptional, the mythical America that took in my refugee grandmother and saved her from death at the hands of the Nazis, the only place where a Polish Jewish refugee girl could have grown up to be a doctor. The mythical Israel, the only democracy in the middle East, scrappy and with the most moral army in the world, the Jewish country where all have equal rights.

Well. I don't even really want to go into the situation in the US.

And of course, the state of Israel this week reminded the world that Jews are neither smarter nor more ethical than other people in the Nation State bill that passed the Knesset, which doesn't explicitly mention chosenness, but which is all about stating the unique right of the Jewish people to inhabit the land, and therefore the state of Israel. It demoted Arabic as a national language, explicitly stated a priority on Jewish settlement, claimed "united Jerusalem" as the capital of Israel and was roundly opposed by most of the Jewish diaspora in America.

There is great fear that this could widen the rift between Israeli/diaspora relations. There is even greater fear that this will lead effectively legalize discrimination against non-Jewish citizens and residents in Israel – although to be fair, the bill does not contain language that explicitly does that.

And yet, I don't want to fall into the common leftist trap of smearing Israel particularly. The Knesset's decision is in the context of increasingly tribal,

nationalist expressions in countries all around the world, including the one where we're currently sitting.

At such moments, I think for many, there is a temptation to do one of two things. One is to dig our heels in defensively, to point out all the ways that this legislation is not that bad, and furthermore, point out all of the ways that Palestinian leadership has failed to show up as a genuine partner for peace, and furthermore all of the ways that Israel is held to a double standard on the world stage. One could deploy many legitimate arguments and true facts in service of that line of reasoning.

Another option is to distance ourselves, to try to be a "good Jew" in the eyes of the world, not like those other "bad," tribalist Jews. To go the anti-Zionist route, reject the idea that Israel has any claim on diaspora Jews, to not engage with Israel except maybe to criticize it. One could make many true arguments in that direction as well.

And both of those are cop-outs. Either one takes a partial truth and elevates it as the only truth, rejecting the truth of others, thus rejecting the humanity and legitimate needs of others and of ourselves. I would argue that to do so is a form of idolatry. And a famous midrash teaches that it was idolatry that destroyed the first temple. We need a better way, both in the US and with regard to Israel to dissent without complete disconnection from our history and our common humanity. Another famous teaching is that the second Temple was destroyed because of *sinat chinam* – baseless hatred between factions of people. We need a way that we can love our country and be seeing other people.

So I look, of course, to Torah, the source, one might say of many of these problems, but also perhaps their solutions.

Devarim, this week's parashah, at the beginning of the book of Deuteronomy, looks back on the history of the Israelite people as they are getting ready to enter the promised land. Rabbi Shai Held points out that while the book of Deuteronomy is full of specific reference to God's love for the Israelite people, "Subtly but powerfully the text makes clear that notwithstanding God's unique love of Israel, God is still very much involved in the lives of other peoples; God. . . has other stories than simply the one with Israel." He points out the instructions in Deuteronomy chapter 2, verse 4-5, forbidding the Israelites from attacking the

Edomites, the descendents of Esau “For I will not give you of their land so much as a foot to tread on; I have given the hill country of Seir as a possession to Esau.” There are similar instructions regarding both the Moabites, and the Ammonites, each of whom have their own relationship with God, each of whom have their own particular traditions, and their own particular land. I love you, God tells the Israelites, but not exclusively. And as Rabbi Held writes further, God’s love, “does not give the people a moral blank check; nor does it suggest that Israel is God’s only concern.”

Can we assume that God loves us, and loves others as well? Can we love ourselves and love each other, and be “seeing other people”?

A press release from yesterday, by Truah, the Rabbinic call for human rights, states “We find ourselves in a dangerous moment for democracy and human rights, in Israel, the United States, and around the world. But we cannot give up. The past 3,000 years of ups and downs in Jewish history have taught us that a better future is always possible. That’s why the 2,000 rabbis and cantors of T’ruah will continue to stand up to attacks on democracy and human rights, and to bring a moral voice and the power of our communities to working toward a better future for both Israelis and Palestinians.”

As Rabbi Jill Jacobs wrote this morning, “This week, too many people have asked me whether I’m ready to give up on Israel. My answer is a resounding no. I’m not giving up on Israel even in the midst of creeping authoritarianism, nor am I giving up on America when we see the same trends here. There have been darker moments in Jewish history, and there have also been moments of redemption.”

Tisha B’Av is tomorrow evening and Sunday. I invite you to come, sit on the floor with me in this sanctuary, and lament the hatred and brokenness, with our rituals on either or both of those days. Feel the excruciating dissonance between the way things are and the way they should be. In that very pain, the hanging in there with the broken humanity of us, we will find a whole truth that will lead towards redemption.