

YOM KIPPUR 5779
GRASSHOPPERS AND GIANTS
RABBI JONATHAN E. BLAKE

This story goes back to when Kelly was preparing for her conversion to Judaism, back in our graduate school days.

One Shabbat after services at Cincinnati's Rockdale Temple, Kelly introduced herself to one of the "regulars" and happily explained why a Kelly McCormick was hanging out at a temple on Shabbat. Now if you know anything about people who go every single week to services — and this is true at any synagogue I've ever attended — or, if you know anything about... Jews, you know that they tend not to hold back in expressing their opinions, so Kelly was treated to one elderly woman's unvarnished, if well-meaning, response to her news:

Why on earth would you ever want to become Jewish? Don't you know how much the Jewish people have suffered throughout history? How much we have endured prejudice and discrimination, torture and genocide, just for our beliefs? Aren't you aware of how a small minority we are? Why would you want to be a part of... that?

For Kelly — who had come to Judaism by way of the joyful prayer and music and wisdom and community of friends and teachers she had found at Hebrew Union College, singing in the choir of the late Bonia Shur on Shabbat mornings — the well-meaning lady's warning was jarring and bewildering. What *wasn't* great about

being Jewish? Kelly wondered. Why would anyone wish to frighten away an eager newcomer?

Some of our gentlewoman's emotional plea may be explained as a function of her *generation*: if you are old enough to remember the Shoah, to remember the precarious first many days of the newborn Jewish State, to remember armies invading Israel on all sides, then the theme of survival in the face of victimhood may reasonably comprise your primary orientation toward Judaism. Tevye the Dairyman summarized this view in his exasperated plea to God: "I know, I know, we are the chosen people. But once in a while, can't you choose somebody else?"¹

In my experience, the Jewish youth growing up here in Westchester and, in many cases, their parents, do not embody the same anxieties about Jewish identity that *their* parents and grandparents and Tevye do or did. If anything, growing up here, in the nexus of Jewish success, they feel pride, joy, and belonging, and an unshakable optimism about the future of the Jewish people.

Still, it seems to me that the classic narrative of victimhood has curiously long arms, and a strong grip that still exerts an outsize influence on our outlook.

To understand the Jewish victimhood mentality, we might go all the way back to the Torah, to the Book of Numbers, Chapter 13.

¹ *Fiddler on the Roof*, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, 1964.

Moses has sent twelve Israelite spies on a mission, to scout out the promised land and report their findings: What kind of land is this? Are its towns walled or unfortified? Is the soil rich or poor, the produce abundant or meager? The spies dutifully report back, and while all twelve agree that the land does indeed flow with milk and honey, that its natural resources abound and its fruit is lush, fully ten of the scouts return in a full-blown panic. “We saw giants there,” they exclaim, breathlessly. “The land we explored devours its inhabitants. All the people we saw were massive. We looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we must have seemed to them.”²

We looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes and so we must have seemed to them. This tells us everything we need to know about victimhood. The perception creates the reality. The way we *choose to see ourselves* shapes our identity.

Please do not mistake my meaning: people have endured abuse and betrayal. Their lives have been forever marked by physical, emotional, and psychological trauma. Families have been torn apart, flesh afflicted, friendships broken. Every marginalized and oppressed people across the world and throughout the ages has a legitimate claim to victimhood.

The question is, what then?

² Numbers 13:1-20, 33.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, “The answer is that uniquely—this is what makes us Homo sapiens—in any given situation we can look back or we can look forward. We can ask: ‘Why did this happen?’ That involves looking back for some cause in the past. Or we can ask, ‘What then shall I do?’ This involves looking forward, trying to work out some future destination given that this is our starting point.”³

Liberated from Pharaoh’s enslavement only recently, the ten spies who entered the promised land and came back looking like grasshoppers were irretrievably stuck in an Egypt of the mind. They could not envision a future that did not perpetuate their ingrained sense of victimhood. Only Joshua and Caleb—the two spies who dissent from the majority report, who say, “we can indeed overcome” any obstacle and take the land as our inheritance—only they can see themselves not as objects acted upon by forces outside their control but rather as subjects, human beings imbued with the power to choose their way forward.

This summer, I visited Israel and the West Bank with a delegation of twenty American rabbis under the auspices of the American Israel Education Foundation, the educational charity affiliated with AIPAC. In the Ramallah offices of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, we met with Dr. Khalil Shikaki, a respected Palestinian political scientist and pollster who spends several months each year teaching at Brandeis. Among the most

³ “On Not Being A Victim: *Re’eh* 2018,” *Covenant & Conversation*, available online at www.rabbisacks.org.

interesting findings of his recent polls of both Palestinian and Israeli society, Dr. Shikaki asked us to consider these:

1. That over the last twenty-five years, there's been significant erosion in support for a two-state solution.
2. That mistrust between the two peoples has never been higher.
3. That each side predominantly thinks that *it* wants peace, but that the *other side* does not.

What exerts a stranglehold on the peace process? Is it Palestinian terrorism? Corrupt and failed leadership? The threat of jihadist Islam from Gaza? Israel's omnipresent security apparatus across the West Bank? Its right-wing government? Its policies on hot-button issues like settlements and the status of Jerusalem?

I would like to suggest that something more potent than all of these has deflated hopes for peace between Israelis and Palestinians: a pervasive mindset of victimhood.

The Palestinian side gives evidence of this mindset everywhere. Israeli scholar and peace negotiator Dr. Tal Becker, who addressed our group the next day, goes so far as to describe a mindset of victimhood as *the* defining characteristic of Palestinian identity. That is to say, Palestinians cannot conceive of themselves, cannot present their narrative, without rooting it in their conflict with Israel. If a Palestinian leader were to emerge today saying, "What we need more than anything is to live in

peace with Israel,” that leader would not be taken seriously by his own people, so pervasive is the mindset of victimhood, the self-image of “grasshopper.”

And, to a lesser but significant extent, Jewish Israelis continue to embrace a grasshopper mindset of their own. As Becker memorably put it, “Israeli Jews are a majority with the mindset of a minority” — they see themselves surrounded by a sea of Arab nations ever seeking to eradicate them — “while American Jews are the inverse, a minority with the mindset of a majority.” In other words, American Jews may represent only 2% of the population — grasshoppers, statistically speaking — but possess a giant’s self-confidence.

As for Israelis, the “victim mindset” seems to me at least partially responsible for the controversial and needlessly provocative “Nation-State Bill” which passed by vote of the Knesset in July, and which forcefully asserts the Jewish character of the Jewish state — to little actual effect, other than an unprovoked black eye to the one in every five Israeli citizens who is not Jewish.

So we have two societies deeply committed to their own narratives of victimhood. The dynamic between Israelis and Palestinians is playing out on college campuses all over the US where we are witnessing a kind of “Oppression Olympics” — pro-Palestinian activists promulgating propaganda intended to highlight only the suffering of Palestinians, while the response of the Jewish community typically points out the Palestinian embrace of

terrorism, and down the spiral we go, until inevitably someone says, “And what about the Holocaust?” and any hope for a productive conversation goes out the window.

How can we administer group therapy to two entire societies? Rather than focusing on borders and security, embassies and settlements, policies and policing, we might want to start with *mindsets*, helping Israelis and Palestinians to become more receptive to the possibility of change.

Becker suggests this could happen by reframing the conflict not in terms of “justice” but rather in terms of “fairness.” The difference is more than semantic. In a “justice” paradigm, your side is trying to *win*, trying to make up for what you perceive to be the wrongs and harm inflicted by the other side. In a “justice” paradigm, you actually *need* the other side to continue to oppress you in order to feel that you’re winning! You need to be a *victim* to be a *victor*— and that’s a paradox where no one wins. Pursuing justice keeps the narrative focused on historic injustices. It roots the dynamic between these two societies in their grievances over the past, each convinced that the other has perpetrated the greater wrong.

An alternative narrative would need, rather, to look to the future. A paradigm of “fairness” rather than “justice,” says Becker, could do this. Such a narrative would validate *each side’s* legitimate claim to the land, but would also insist that each side ought not assert its claim to *all* of the land, in the *shared* interest of peace. The conflict would then become about “what’s fair” going forward, as opposed

to “how does my side get justice” for what happened in the past. A “fairness” paradigm could break the victim mindset, allowing both sides to feel less “grasshopper” and more “giant.”

In ways simultaneously different and yet no less consequential, we see similar dynamics playing out today in our country. We’ve heard much about the polarization within American society. We might benefit from exploring how mindsets of victimhood perpetuate and widen the divide.

In the last year we have seen a dramatic rise in the phenomenon of “wokeness” — a word that signals one’s awareness of systemic injustices and willingness to call them out. People and communities that are “woke” are attentive to America’s ongoing racial injustices [of the sort Rabbi Levy detailed in his sermon last night] in policing and incarceration, to the indignities visited on people of color all over the world, to the abuse and discrimination experienced by the LGBTQ community, and so forth.

The phenomenon does not belong exclusively to the left or the right. On one side we have “wokeness,” and on the other we hear narratives of victimhood as well, which inform Americans’ views about the potential dangers that immigrants pose to jobs or neighborhood safety or the economy, and the perceived threats posed by diversity or dialogue or “political correctness.” It seems that a vast number of Americans these days are single-mindedly obsessed with how someone else has screwed them over.

The phenomenon of “wokeness” illuminates how many people and groups have endured abuse, physical, emotional and psychological torment, the deprivation of opportunity and the kinds of traumas that persist from generation to generation. The ongoing marginalization of minorities; the hopelessness felt by working-class Americans; the helplessness felt by families touched by addiction, spiraling debt, wage stagnation and skyrocketing healthcare costs — these are all real.

But it’s not enough simply to identify all these injustices. David Brooks recently wrote that “The problem with wokeness is that it doesn’t inspire action; it freezes it. To be woke is first and foremost to put yourself on display. To make a problem seem massively intractable is to inspire separation — building a wall between you and the problem — not a solution.”⁴

Observing that “most great social reforms have happened in moments of optimism, not moments of pessimism, in moments of encouraging progress, not in moments of perceived threat,”⁵ Brooks goes on to urge that we confront the great sins of society as opportunities for meaningful change, not as chronic wounds, lesions of endless pain and indignation.

He’s talking about a shift in mindset, from victim to victor, from grasshopper to giant, from merely *calling out* great and historic

⁴ *The New York Times*, “The Problem With Wokeness,” June 7, 2018.

⁵ *Ibid.*

injustices to *working constructively* on fair and forward-thinking solutions.

“We can ask: ‘Why did this happen?’... Or we can ask, ‘What then shall I do?’”

Where even to begin? The work ahead seems daunting. Maybe we can identify with those spies who said it would be better to go back to Egypt, or die in the wilderness, than to enter the promised land. Maybe we don't feel ready, just yet, to go out from this sanctuary and change the world.

Maybe all we can begin to do today is work on changing our *mindsets* — and maybe, for today, that will be enough.

It feels like the right work for Yom Kippur, doesn't it?

Let us, then, in the spirit of this holiest day of the year, take a little time to reflect and ask ourselves:

- Where in my life do I see myself as a victim?
- How much time do I spend rehearsing my own unhappiness?
- Can I validate hard events in my life while committing to forward motion in my own growth?

I've heard it said that most of us are driving through life holding on to the rearview mirror, thinking it's the steering wheel. What

would it feel like to let the past be the past and turn the wheel toward the future?

Viktor Frankl, the Austrian neuroscientist who survived Auschwitz and went on to write *Man's Search for Meaning*, insisted that even in the death camps, where the Nazis took everything we had, there remained one thing they could not take: our freedom to choose how to respond. "When we are no longer able to change a situation... we are challenged to change ourselves," he said.⁶

John McCain emerged, bent and broken, from a Hanoi torture camp, and established a second career as a public servant. Malala Yousafzay survived a Taliban ambush that put a bullet in her skull and dedicated her life to female education. Nelson Mandela endured twenty-seven years in prison before negotiating the end of apartheid rule and presiding over South Africa's transition to a multicultural democracy.

In his dank cell, night after night, Mandela took comfort in William Ernest Henley's 1875 poem "Invictus," which concludes:

*I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

There could be no more relevant or consequential message for Yom Kippur!

⁶ *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006. p. 112.

To be a Jew is to be the captain of your soul.

To be a Jew is to exercise your freedom of choice to rise above fate.

To be a Jew is to choose a life of holiness no matter what life hands you.

And to be a Jew on Yom Kippur is to harness the power of forgiveness to move forward and not stay stuck.

Forgiveness of your past. Forgiveness of the people in your life who have hurt you. Forgiveness of God for not handing you the life you always wanted, the life you felt you deserved.

Forgiveness of your dead, who now cannot atone for their own shortcomings, who left you alone with ragged wounds and memories, inadequacies and unmet needs. And forgiveness of yourself, for all the ways you have not yet become the person you want to be — not yet, but still could.

Forgiveness isn't giving the other guy a free pass. It's releasing our burden. Forgiveness is deciding to loosen the stranglehold that we allow what this person said, or that person did, or this person failed to do, or say, to exert over our thoughts and our lives.

No one knows who said this first, but whoever did, said it best: "Forgiveness is giving up all hope for a better past."

So here we are: human beings, flawed and fallible, scared and scarred—but still capable of greatness.

Will we see ourselves in the year to come as grasshoppers or giants?

Of all the things out of our hands in this mad and mixed-up world, that one choice is ours, and ours alone.