

**Wexner Alumni Institute**  
**Dvar Torah**  
**February 4, 2025**  
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Shalom, *hevre*.

I begin by calling you *hevre*, my friends, my people.

I think it's what we most hope and aspire to be to one another.

And I begin with these words as a request, an invitation.

Over the next few minutes I'll say some things that may be hard for some to hear, to consider, to accept. Please know they come from a place of appreciation and respect, for what we share, for what divides us, and for what we struggle over.

A number of months ago, I was at a Jewish community event listening to a speaker, a Jewish professor at UC Berkeley, talking about the post-Oct. 7 campus encampment and climate.

At the end of his prepared remarks, the professor was asked why Jewish students are as actively involved in "anti-Israel," "pro-Palestine" activities as they are. The professor, with barely a pause, answered confidently and nonchalantly that these young Jews are either ashamed or uneducated about what it means to be Jewish.

My younger child, not quite 24 years old, is one of those young Jewish anti-Zionists. I wondered how the professor, someone so smart about so many things, could be so mistaken about the motivations of so many young Jews. The simple explanation is that it's more comfortable to deride and dismiss those that challenge us, particularly if they're young, than it is to take them seriously and reckon with what they're saying.

I'd be perfectly happy if my child's politics were different. But I also know my child has a strong Jewish education, deep affection for Judaism and Jewish life, a thick Jewish identity, and loves Jewish learning and community.

I also know that given their views about Israel, my child would not feel or be fully welcomed here among us. That, despite the fact, that the fellowship's *raison d'être* was to create a more pluralistic Jewish community. It wasn't necessarily *this* pluralism Les Wexner or the foundation staff, or any of us were thinking about 40 years ago. Or maybe even 5 years ago. And yet, here we are.

This coming Shabbat we read *Parashat B'Shalach*. The following week we celebrate *Tu B'Shvat*. It's a journey from narrowness and confinement to budding and blooming. The juxtaposition of the *parsha* and the holiday feel emblematic of the times we're living in and of the times we hope for and need to be working towards.

The opening verse of B'shalach reads:

וַיְהִי בְשַׁלַּח פְּרַעֲהָ אֶת־הָעָם וְלֹא־נָתַם אֱלֹהִים דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים כִּי קָרוֹב הָיָא II כִּי אָמַר אֱלֹהִים פְּוִי־נַתַּם הָעָם בְּרֹאֲתָם מִלְחָמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרָיִמָּה:

Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt."

We've been reading for weeks about the Israelites in *Mitzrayim*, in a place of narrowness and constriction. We know how the Israelites have toiled and suffered in *Mitzrayim*. We are elated for them when they finally gain their freedom.

And yet.

The verse reflects God's understanding that despite everything the Israelites suffered in *Mitzrayim*, they might well go back there rather than face new and unknown challenges. They might overlook all they'd been through, rather than face a new and adaptive challenge.

I wonder how we as a people and as leaders have become like the Israelites. How hard it has become to believe in anything beyond ourselves and our experiences up to this point.

We live in a world in which trust has been lost in so many of the institutions that contributed to the thriving of Jewish life in this country for a century:

- The university
- The media
- Government
- The courts

I sense us as a community struggling, and in some instances giving up the struggle to accentuate our shared values, commitments, and purpose, over and above our political and religious differences.

I see us being influenced by the world we live in, which more and more insists on a full throated and uncritical embrace of Israel, or a full throated and uncritical condemnation of it.

It is hard to hold together a network, a community this large, this varied, this tenuously connected to one another across many years and many miles.

And yet, if we cannot do just that, I wonder what leads us to think the American Jewish community can or should try to do the same.

Our institute calls on and is designed to better equip us to exercise leadership in uncertain times.

Moshe was called on to do the same thing. There could not have been more uncertain times than the Exodus. And we hold Moshe up as the greatest of Jewish leaders.

And yet.

As Matt shared yesterday, we read in *B'shalach* that the Israelites went out of Egypt *Hamushim*, a common translation of which, as Matt taught us, is armed.

But there is another interpretation of *Hamushim*, that it means one fifth or 20%.

What happens when we consider that perhaps as few as one in five of the Israelites chose to leave *Mitzrayim*, that four out of five chose to remain behind? What happens when we consider that the great leader Moshe, perhaps left 80% of the Israelites behind in *Mitzrayim*?

My child, the children of more than a few of us in this room, and many other Jews, younger and older, very much want to be meaningfully engaged and included in Jewish community. They want to be at Hillel, in synagogue, in communal conversations, and at the Seder table as much as they did before they lost their connection to Israel.

And yet.

How do we embrace those who by nature of their positions and beliefs, make us feel threatened, even fearful for our very existence? How can we make space for those who threaten our sense of safety and security?

I don't know. But I do know that condemning, castigating, and rejecting are very ineffective strategies for getting people to see or do things our way.

Like the Israelites as they left *Mitzrayim*, we are in unknown territory. We are unprepared psychically for what we are now encountering. But none of us want to

believe we would have been one of the 4/5ths that chose to stay behind in *Mitzra yim*. None of us want to believe we would have left 4/5ths of our brothers and sisters – of our children – behind in *Mitzra yim*.

Which is perhaps where we could start. With the understanding that we currently find ourselves in another kind of *Mitzra yim*. We find ourselves in a narrower place than many of us have ever known. Perhaps than most of us could have imagined. We have no choice but to believe we will find our way through the narrowness, and to strive and struggle to make that so.

Let us do the hard, painful, adaptive work now, so that when we succeed, when we've made our way to a new budding and blooming place, we are able to look around and find all our children, all our people with us, and know that we chose to not leave anyone behind.