

SHABBAT SERMON
Parashat Va-eira
5778

I've told this story before. There is a Presbyterian pastor in Fort Myers – his church is five miles from here – who led the movement in the national Presbyterian church to support the BDS movement. He was successful. The Presbyterian Church voted to support BDS and reaffirmed that decision a year or two ago. In December 2015, the pastor wrote a scathing anti-Israel letter to the editor of the News-Press, a letter I answered in equally sharp tone a few weeks later.

In my 4 ½ years in Fort Myers, I have never met this pastor. But I go to enough functions where it could easily happen. What should I do if I come face to face with him? If he extends his hand, should I shake it? This man wants to hurt something I love deeply. How should I behave if I come face to face with him? I avoid some programs where I know his congregation is active so I don't have to meet him. Am I doing the right thing?

This issue is acute for me today for two reasons:

One is that I am reading the book “Civility” by Stephen Carter, a Yale Law professor. Carter is also a devout Christian and his writing reflects it. So, referring to the central command of the Torah – You shall love your neighbor as yourself – Carter writes this:

- The theologian Donald W. Shriver, Jr., in *An Ethic for Enemies*, argues vigorously that the obligation to love others not only extends to but is in some sense intended for those who have done us terrible wrongs. He proposes “a collective turning from the past that neither ignores past evil nor excuses it” in order to make peace between those who have been enemies. And, in particular, he insists that those who have been wronged must forgo vengeance, lest they become the very evil they profess to hate.

Talking about society in general, Carter writes this:

- By encouraging us to see even those with whom we disagree as full equals before God, civility enables us to hold the respectful

dialogues without which democratic decision-making is impossible.

I read this book and I am embarrassed. Am I doing my best, am I serving God or the Jewish people by avoiding this man? Would I serve God or the Jewish people well if, in a chance meeting, I refused to shake his hand?

The second reason why this issue came back to haunt me is that I was very disappointed this week to read that Israel has a blacklist of people to whom it refuses entry into the country. People who lead BDS movements in other countries are refused boarding on a plane for Israel or turned away at Passport Control. At least one of the people on the list is a Jewish woman who heads the group, Jewish Voice for Peace – a Jewish group that actively promotes BDS. I was bothered by this story. I thought, “As long as these people do not actively promote or participate in violence, of what are we afraid? Free speech? Disagree-

ing with the government? Do Israel serve itself well or hurt itself by keeping these people out of the country?

When thinking about Israel I thought about myself? Can I have expectations for Israel that I do not have for myself? For sure, I cannot.

If there's an open question about how we interact with those who actively dislike us and even want to hurt us in some way, there is no question about broad, generalized prejudice. We cannot never say, "All Muslims are bad;" "All Palestinians are bad." We cannot say this and certainly not act on it.

A Temple Judea member sent me a story from his congregation up north. In that congregation, a member came to shul with his caregiver who happened to be Muslim. During the service, the caregiver took the man to the bathroom. While she was waiting for her patient, another

congregant approached her and told her to get out of the synagogue and never come back. She quit her job because of this incident.

It is difficult to remember this: people who are different from us, even people who dislike us, are created in God's image just as we are. Being different does not make them either bad or a threat. The person who berated and threatened that woman desecrated God and the Jewish people. His behavior was a *chilul HaShem*, a desecration of God's name.

The Torah does not want us to be pacifists. God was certainly not a pacifist in bringing the Ten Plagues, the first seven of which are in this morning's parashah. But Judaism does have us spill out some wine at the Seder for every one of those plagues. And the Torah does say, in the book of Deuteronomy, that we must not hate the Egyptians for, in the beginning of the story, they took us in when we needed a place to go.

What I try to remember myself, what I want the State of Israel to remember – and what we should all remember in dealing with those we dislike – is that we are not weak. We are not helpless. As Jews, we have never been stronger than we are today, in Israel and in the United States. Never. And it is with that knowledge that we must push ourselves to take the hand and look in the eye those who dislike us.

In 1993, President Clinton had to twist Yitzhak Rabin's arm to get him to shake Arafat's hand. It was not an easy thing for Rabin to do. But it was the right thing to do. It was then, and it still is today. We Jews are strong enough to do that.