

**Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz**  
**Friday, February 16, 2024**

*Machkloket L'Shem Shmayim.* Disagreement for the sake of Heaven is what this expression means. That is to say, that we don't argue for the sake of arguing itself, but for the sake of Heaven....aspects of life that are meant for the augmenting of our lives, of our human condition. Indeed, there is disagreement here as there is at home. And it can be rough, but I experience so much of it (and perhaps, fair to say that the environments in which I spend time are self-selected) as discussions meant not to defeat the other, but to hear and understand; to grow and evolve. The arguments are meant to help one another find some kind of solution to the madness.

And that is how I spent my entire Shabbat (now, last Shabbat into the next days of this past week). I first went for dinner at a former tour guide's home. He guided about five of our TBJ Missions. He was beloved by our members for his wisdom, intelligence, huge heart, sense of humor, generosity, honesty, and love. He is one of Joel's oldest friends and Joel and Gail (I think Gail also) helped introduce him to his wife. He prepared such a lavish dinner. It seems that every meal is that way here. They had another couple, longtime friends of theirs over as well. All started and continued about family, professions, children, etc. But, as we got close to dessert, we went deeper. I was asked what it meant to bring a solidarity trip to Israel. What do American Jews want and gain from such missions during wartime? It was a hard but fair question. Asked with sensitivity and I answered, I hope with the same tone. She worried about these missions being about sensationalism. I understood. After all, our Mission explored ravaged parts of the country that so many Israelis have not seen. I assured her that we worried about the same. We didn't want to come here unless we could be helpful in some manner or another. And so, I told her about our efforts to initiate and then continue long-term relationships with ravaged communities that we might not only help in rebuilding, but in helping to help them heal because of new relationships with us. We want to have our kids and adults connect as Jews and human beings for the growth and healing of both of our respective communities. I also told her that as for us in the States, we have been both awoken and lost. We have realized more than ever the importance of our faith, identity, and Homeland. We didn't want to stand idly by. We wanted to help. We wanted to bear witness. We wanted to be here to see and report and be part of the healing process. And from what I see from afar, the travelers of our mission have started that process at home with our clergy. She felt relieved to hear my answer and I assured that we want to be of real help...and indeed, we receive the support of Israelis to maintain our strength as we deal with renewed hatred at home.

Then the conversation went deeper. There was a sobering conversation about the war and the hostages. One person said, "Of course, we want every hostage to come home, but is there a cost involved to being able to eradicate Hamas?" What she went on to wonder is about the trade for terrorists in Israeli jails for the hostages. She remarked that the last time this happened, terrorists released ended up being some of the masterminds of the October 7th massacre. She was just trying to weigh the overall benefit to society. She spoke of such with love and sensitivity, and there was nothing brash about her commentary. The disagreement continued with another person at the table, who said, "Listen, we abandoned the people of the South before October 7th; we abandoned them on the October 7th itself; and now we have no choice but to do anything and everything we can not to abandon them again." The honesty of both sides; the sensitivity of both sides was clear and poignant. I have my own feelings, but all I could do was listen with full intention. Neither attempted to convince the other, just to state from the deepest places in their souls what might be the most prudent path. There was no yelling; no screaming, no hysterics; just arduous, authentic expression for resolution that will maintain security and a belief in a social contract for the future of Israel and perhaps, a peaceful Palestinian State. No offense to we Americans, but I don't experience most of our conversations at home to be as thoughtful, without the ulterior intention to convince the other. It was indeed a disagreement for the "sake of Heaven" ...of what might be best for all. The dessert was excellent and sweet.

The next day, I went to Shabbat lunch at Eli Beer and his family's home. Eli, as many of you know, is a longtime friend of my family and mine....and has become the same to many at TBJ over the past 15 years. He is the Head of United Hatzalah Israel. I can go on and on about their extraordinary virtues and lifesaving efforts every moment of every week for any person of any type. I am indeed proud of our congregation's partnership with UH. It was such a fine experience. He and his wife, Gitti and family are as gracious as they are kind and generous. Yes, indeed, another lavish meal. But more, every other guest was someone more interesting than the next. There was a doctor, here to volunteer for two weeks. Another woman who finally decided to make Aliyah after years of going to and fro. An elderly couple and their adult daughter.... a family who is self-made, having built so much of the waterfront property in Israel. Probably one of the more accomplished families in Israel, but only so attractive because of their ordinariness; their ultimate humility. It made for an hours-long experience. Laughter and stories; tears and stories told of the past few months. Hopes and dreams expressed; funny stories told, and a few drinks shared. And, then yes, politics arose. It got hot, opinions expressed about politics here and in the States. Voices raised; emotions flared. But it was never volatile in ways that made anyone want to get up from the table and separate. Everyone listened with generosity; and no one came close to deriding the other. Each of us knew that the opinions around the table came from the same, shared space of hope for a society where everyone around the table would be able to belong....and I assure you, there was diversity of every kind you might think around the table. Argument and disagreement for the sake of Heaven.... of a more just world in which to live for anyone who is willing to live in that space.

There is so much more to write, but I try to stay cognizant of you!

So, I will say in short, I had a moving and beautiful visit with one of your sons and family. They are here doing work about which I cannot write.... I will just say, I was so proud to see their growth and evolution as people and as a family.

I didn't miss the Superbowl. Joel has friends all of whom made Aliyah decades ago. They have a tradition of watching a replay of the game at 7:30 AM. Everyone has to promise to turn off their phones, so no one knows the results. The game was obviously exciting, but conversations amongst these Israeli/Americans between plays revolved around which of their sons were/are in Gaza and when they might return. Talk about surreal. Superbowl and war and breakfast.... all to which I am not accustomed in such a combination. Here arguments only revolved around football. As a beleaguered Jets Fan, I kept my mouth shut.

The insane part of shutting my phone off is that I received no news. Generally, you should know that I don't race to read the news in the morning because it is always lousy these days here. However, the one morning my phone is off is the morning of the unbelievable news that two hostages had been rescued. Wow, what a dose of good news. So strange on so many levels, but just the speed with which these hostages were home with families was quite, well, sudden. Imagine the hopelessness of these hostages; and in one harrowing moment, they are saved and suddenly home with their loved ones. Their faces of shock are ones I will not soon forget. Please bring the rest home.

And finally, Joel, Gail and I at the end of the day went to see my favorite of favorite Israeli singers, Shlomo Artzi. I never imagined I would see a concert here during wartime. But this is the country; trying hard to continue to live in the midst of it all. He just started to appear again after months of playing for beleaguered communities. And Artzi being Artzi modified the tone of the whole concert from the several times I have seen him before. He spoke constantly of the war; the hostages and how it is that we might navigate these days. He spoke in a manner that was for the "sake of Heaven" for sure. He went from saying he had no words to singing to us in ways that were utterly comforting. Joel caught me on video singing along with the completely Israeli crowd. This is not something I would generally share, but for sure it caught how I felt and how connected I have come to feel this month, as I have throughout my life.

I am so mixed. I only have a bit left here. I want to see my family very badly. I miss them all the time...I miss TBJ. I just wish I could have all of that together.... Israel and you.

Love from a train to Haifa for yet another visit.

The next post will come soon and with the most important news I have had to share yet!

Here's to disagreements and perhaps, even loving agreement for the Sake of Heaven!