

Brotherhood, Boundary, Border

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A number of years ago my family and I went to the Museum of Natural History in New York City over Passover when the kids were off from school.

Ilan and I decided to go see the movie at the Hayden Planetarium. We sat back in the recliner seats and stared up at the enormous semi-sphere above us. The room went dark, the music swelled, stars slowly appeared and then Neil DeGrasse Tyson's voice welcomed us to a tour of the universe. This particular movie was about the lifespan of stars. As we traveled millions of miles through sparkingly speckled black and grey skies, Tyson explained that stars consume helium and burn bright yellow for billions of years until their helium supply exhausts. Once that happens they begin consuming the heavier elements of their structure. There's lots of pyrotechnics and projectiles during this phase and eventually the star becomes a white dwarf. In the immediate vicinity of the star's death throws, what is not destroyed by projectiles are pulled into its expanding size.

It was fascinating stuff.

That is until Tyson reminded us that our own sun is a star. He explained that in about 5 billion years it is predicted that our sun will exhaust its helium supply and as it goes through its final phases, earth will be pulled into the sun. We watched as the sun turned red, got bigger, absorbed the earth, then turned into a white dwarf and faded out of its position in our solar system and into the universe beyond...along with every single thing we have ever known.

Then Tyson said “watch your step as you leave and thank you for visiting the Hayden planetarium!”

The lights came up. Everyone got up and started to walk out. Ilan and I sat still. Looking straight ahead Ilan said “that was not the ending I was expecting.”

The best I could come up with was “no worries buddy that’s not for a long time.”

There’s something about oblivion that doesn’t get better because its not going to happen for a while. We caught up with the family and Hana said “should we get lunch?” Ilan and I were like “what’s the point?”

Seeing things from such heights and time horizons is indeed perspective altering. For a planet that will eventually end up pulverized we have certainly found plenty of ways to score deep fault lines into it. Billions of years before it comes apart it is already fractured in so many ways. Like the midrash about the man who bores a hole beneath his seat in a boat filled with people saying “I’m only doing it under my seat”, we have found so many ways to pretend we don’t all live on the same planet. In fact we have found plenty of ways to imagine we live on different planets.

Religion, country, culture, political party, race- there are so many ways to create us and them as Pink Floyd sang in their album Dark Side of the Moon:

Us and them and after all we’re only ordinary men...
Me and you, God only knows its not what we would choose to do...
Up and Down and in the end its only round and round...

When you see our world at a distance even our most innocent lines seem fairly capricious. From a cosmic perspective it seems strange that that house is in the Chappaqua school district and that one is in the Armonk

schools? Or that New York ends here and Connecticut begins there? At what point exactly in the swirling waters below Niagara Falls are you in Canada? As the fish cross the line below and birds move across it freely overhead, cars line up so we can show a plastic card to people in uniforms that lets everyone including ourselves know where we belong. Borders blaze their way through mountains as if the mountain is not there, as if the border is not there. Animal behavior is indeed strange.

Why do animals like us need to know that a certain stretch of land is identified with a particular flag, national anthem and language? Why do animals like us need to tell stories about ourselves that differentiate us from other humans with different stories? No doubt these lines of distinction, these symbols of difference have been the basis for much conflict. On such a big planet is a piece of land worth killing for? Is arguing over whose story is more true worth dying for?

The author Michael Chabon thinks that whenever we draw these boundaries around ourselves we are unnecessarily policing and excluding other people's lives. He spoke this past May to the graduating class of the Reform Movement's rabbinical school and charged them to "knock down the walls" that had been been constructed by Jewish tradition. He said:

I abhor homogeneity and insularity, exclusion and segregation, the redlining of neighborhoods, the erection of border walls and separation barriers. I am for mongrels and hybrids and creoles, for syncretism and confluence, for jazz and Afrobeat and Thai surf music, for integrated neighborhoods and open borders ... I am for ambiguity, ambivalence, fluidity, muddle, complexity, diversity, creative balagan... Monocultural places—one language, one religion...make me profoundly uncomfortable whether they're found inside or beyond the ghetto walls.

Chabon claims that one of the problems of exclusive identity is the way it implicates us in the actions of others who share that identity. He said:

at some point—I think it might have started with Baruch Goldstein—the comforting line I tried to draw between the nice kind of religion and the nasty began to waver, and then one day it just collapsed. It wasn't the worst thing that did the trick; nobody died. But one day I saw video footage of some male Haredim in Jerusalem assaulting a group of young girls for the sin of daring to learn, all these pious ganefs throwing rocks at little girls, and in my outrage and disgust I found myself thinking *That is not Judaism*. And then, immediately afterward, *Those are not Jews*.

The moment Chabon felt himself drawing an exclusionary circle around his kind of Jews, he decided the very enterprise of Jewish identity, like other exclusive identities was flawed. He ends by charging the graduates to strengthen the Jewish genome by exposing it to as much change and diversity as possible and repudiate all purity tests, separation barriers and all rhetoric of dehumanization.

Chabon is far from the first post-modern writer to rail against national and religious identities but its pretty gutsy to say it to a group of newly minted rabbis at their ordination. Its like asking an anarchist to speak at a law school.

To be fair, Chabon is not without his texts. Abraham's tent was open on all sides and is the source for the mitzvah of radical hospitality and openness to the outside world. Jewish tradition models the wedding canopy, the huppah around the image of Abraham's tent. The message is an important one: at the moment when we are most likely to draw our circle of love tightly around two people we are forced to look out and expand our circle of care. Take our joy and share it. When we are most likely to be self absorbed we are forced to see beyond ourselves.

The problem of course with Chabon's argument is that we don't love universally. We love specifically. Specific people, things, stories. It is through loving those specific things that we come to know who we are. It is human nature to go from the particular to the universal. We love from the inside out.

First we have to know who we are.

The plastic card presented at the Canadian border identifying someone as American represents not only privileges and rights but pride, belonging and a sense of home. Jewish identity does the same by adding a deeply textured system of religious and ethical values and a people who act like an extended family. Borders and brotherhood are the things that let us know where home is.

But on balance are these identities responsible for more harm than good? Doesn't belonging also, necessarily involve excluding?

Peoplehood makes us feel like we have an extended family. But what is the line between that and when human animals of one skin color gather with torches to protect their group identity?

Country makes us feel like we have a home. But from thousands of miles above our planet watching families stopped and separated the minute they walk passed an invisible border line seems pretty strange.

Religion gives us lenses through which to see meaning in the world. But hovering over our planet one would wonder why a person with a black hat would throw a rock at a girl who is simply reading a book.

Chabon is not entirely wrong. The lines we draw can create conflict and it does seem that there is an increase in boundary drawing. With an influx of refugees and a rise in nationalist parties the post-war Pangea of the

European Union has never looked more threatened. What used to be a universal symbol of family gathering on winter Sundays has now become a debate about protest and patriotism. And even the death of a longtime public servant devolved into a debate over lowering flags and renaming senate buildings.

Is Chabon right? Are our identities ultimately just ways to divide and diss each other?

This summer I went into the heart of one of the most difficult conflicts around identities and borders. Hana and I were asked to join a group of Jewish leaders including journalists, non-profit executives, clergy and thought leaders on a four day trip into the West Bank to East Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Ramallah. Including one night of home hospitality with a Palestinian family.

When people asked what our family was doing this summer we said, “well the kids are going to Ramah and we are going to Ramallah.”

When we signed the release forms we sort of paused and said “are we really going to do this?”

In the end it was the organization that made it compelling. The organization is called ‘Encounter’ and just as their name suggests, they are not an advocacy group promoting a particular policy or solution when it comes to the conflict. What they promote is listening to people’s stories and getting to know them and their lives. In the end all they facilitate is an encounter.

We were nervous about the trip and so I spoke to a rabbinic colleague who had gone on a previous trip. “What was it like to meet with Palestinians?” I asked. He said “spoiler alert: they’re people.”

In one of the pre-trip sessions we talked about what it means to listen, especially on such a difficult issue. We talked about four levels of listening.

I actually found it useful for everyday life.

The most basic level of listening is where we hear things that confirm our existing opinions and understandings of the world. The second level is paying attention to and actually hearing facts that are at odds with our existing understanding of a situation. The third level is empathic, seeing a situation through another person's eyes. After acknowledging a different narrative and seeing the world through someone else's eyes the fourth level of listening is sensing an emerging future. Some new reality in which our self understanding, our understanding of others and the world begins to shift and move to a different place. Because its the most difficult kind of listening this level is rare. The short hand for this process of listening is "open mind, open will, open heart."

"When you ask questions," they counseled us, "ask yourself first if the question is leading the speaker to a place you want them to go or if the question emerges out of a sense of your own genuine curiosity."

An example of a not so productive question might be: "why do you always blow people up." The people we were meeting with were decidedly non-violent so it was possible they would be a bit offended by that. Examples of more productive questions would be "do you think violence against civilians creates any progress? How does Palestinian violence impact your families? To what extent does a feeling of powerlessness influence the role violence plays?"

They also counseled us to be aware of what happens to our bodies as we hear people tell their stories. Do we feel our heart racing? Do we tense up? They encouraged us to find ways to listen beyond our lines of resistance. In the end the question was: beyond the boundaries, brotherhoods and borders could we see a human being?

On the second day we visited the refugee camp Aida near Bethlehem. Residents of Aida are refugees and descendants of refugees from the Jerusalem and Hevron areas displaced during the war of independence. Normally you would think of a refugee camp as filled with temporary tents but this camp has been in existence for 70 years and though run down and dilapidated, is filled with apartment buildings and a cultural arts center where we met Abdelfattah Abusrour. Abdelfattah grew up in the Aida camp went on to get his masters and Phd in Biological and Medical engineering in Paris and returned to run an arts program for children in the camp. The arts program encourages non-violence, peace and respect for others. Abdelfattah calls the program "beautiful resistance."

He spoke to us about the cultural arts program and the children who participate. It sounded amazing actually. But then someone asked why the camp is still maintained as a refugee camp. Why not invest resources into normalizing life and re-conceptualize from refugee camp to a Palestinian village? Abdelfattah seemed like the perfect role model for transitioning from refugee to established, educated professional.

He went on to explain that all refugees from the disaster, or Nakba of 1948, as he referred to it, must be allowed to return to their homes and that refugee camps like Aida are reminders of the daily injustice of the occupation. He then took us outside where he showed us a wall with the names of all the martyrs who have died in resisting Israel and a 50 foot arch with a 10 foot tall and 20 foot long key, "it is the largest key in the world and it went on tour in Europe" he said with pride. "That key symbolizes all the keys we have to homes we cannot go back to." And then he said, "if you think Israel is such an open and inclusive country just ask the Ethiopian Jews how welcome they feel."

I could hear Neil Degrasse Tyson's voice in my head "watch your step as you leave and thank you for visiting the west bank!"

After a minute of trying to be aware of my racing heart and tense body I gave up. If a PhD in science could not see that he was contributing to a perpetuation of victimhood and a culture that would never accept the existence of another people with their own rights to national expression, then who would?

I didn't need to review the levels of listening to know I wasn't making much progress.

Then we visited a Palestinian village called Bet Zakariyah. The head of the village council, Abu Ibrahim spoke to us about what it is like to live in Area C of the West Bank. Area C under the Oslo accords is under Israeli municipal and military control. These tend to be the areas closest to Israeli neighborhoods and most critical for Israeli security.

We stood next to a ruined mosque as Abu Ibrahim pointed to a ramshackle single level school building with a corrugated metal roof. The school he explained, like the ruined mosque were refused building permits. They built the school anyway because, as he explained "where are we supposed to educate our kids?" Across the valley he pointed to the town of Alon Shvut a Jewish village in the Gush Etzion area of the West Bank. In the not very far distance we saw large, new buildings including a yeshiva school for the village's children.

Getting building permits for area C is nearly impossible unless you are in a Jewish town. The Oslo process broke down but it is still the status quo for many Palestinians who live there. Area C was eventually supposed to be areas absorbed in to Israel and villages like this either moved or integrated. But with no "eventually" in the future the residents of Bet Zakariyah are frozen in time.

For the first time I realized that in my trips to Israel I was always standing at the Alon Shvuts looking out at Arab villages not knowing or to be fair

really even thinking much about them. For the first time I was looking at Israel from the other side.

As I looked at the modest school building in front of me and the beautiful big Yeshiva building across the valley I asked myself, "is this my Judaism?"

When I was 15 I entered the Jaffa Gate of the old city for the first time. As I walked through the bullet riddled stone entrance I reached up and kissed the mezuzah which was made of an exploded shell. Our guide pointed to the mezuzah and quoted the Torah text about beating swords into plowshares. Over the years as I have gone through that gate and down towards the kotel, entering the holy city as the paratroopers did in 1967 I never lost the feeling of that first time but most of all the feeling of returning. Every time I return I feel like I am doing so with generations of my people.

This particular day, however, I was standing on the opposite side of the old city at the Damascus gate. Our guide was Ahmad Sub Laban who was taking us to his family's apartment in the muslim quarter of the old city. He told us about the generations of his family that have lived there. He pointed out the increased Israeli military presence in the wake of a string of stabbings. There were three raised and covered platforms with Israeli soldiers keeping watch as people went through the gate.

As we entered the gate I had the strangest feeling. Imagine going home to your house and the front door is moved 20 feet to the right. As you walk in the stairs to the second floor are in another part of the house and the furniture is all different. You know you're home but it feels completely different.

Everything felt completely familiar, the Jerusalem stone, the retail stalls, the spices, the chazerai but all the shopkeepers were Palestinian. There were more crescent moons than stars. As we walked, Ahmad pointed up to an apartment building with a large menorah and Israeli flags. Ariel Sharon, he

explained, purchased that apartment as a way to create a Jewish foothold in the muslim quarter. When we got to his family's apartment and sat in the living room he told us about attempts over the years to get his family to give up the apartment and sell it to Jewish buyers.

As Ahmad spoke to us I noticed a picture above him. It was of his mother when she was in her 20s in a long sleeved white dress. Her head was uncovered and her long, straight black hair settled on her shoulders. She was sitting in a red fabric chair and smiling towards the camera. Was it her wedding?

I found myself inhabiting Ahmad's story. Maybe it was entering from the other side to a place I'd never been but that felt so much like home. I was still Abraham but my son was Ishmael, the Israeli flag was theirs and the Israeli soldiers in the corners of the narrow alleyways were them too.

Us and Them, Me and You, Up and Down. I felt like the fish in Niagara's waters and the birds overhead, I was in the car taking out my plastic card, but it had two sides.

Like the drone in the Israeli show Fauda, we passed easily back over the security fence and check points and returned to West Jerusalem. Hana and I headed back to our apartment near the Inbal hotel. Our heads were spinning. There was only one thing to do- go to the shuk, sit at a bar and order beers as big as our heads.

I didn't come away with any ideas of how to solve the conflict. I didn't convince anyone they were wrong and I wasn't convinced someone else was right.

Sometimes its just helpful to see the line. Walk right up to it, put your toe across and see what happens.

All we did was listen and try to recognize the human being on the other side. It is everything and nothing all at once.

Michael Chabon would probably say it wasn't enough. We have to give up our narratives or prepare to merge them.

Chabon represents one extreme of this conversation.

The other extreme would say we should not be engaging with the enemy because when we do we humanize them.

The rabbis tell a story about what that kind of line drawing leads to.

Rabbi Elazar ben Dama was bitten by a snake. A healer sees Ben Dama suffering and offers to heal him. There's only one problem, the healer is a disciple of Jesus. Rabbi Ishmael sees this and warns Ben Dama "you are not permitted to be healed by a disciple of Jesus!" Ben Dama in the midst of his suffering says "The Torah will allow him to heal me and I will find you a source to prove it." But before he can say anything else Ben Dama dies.

Rabbi Ishmael speaks at Ben Dama's funeral and explains "Ben Dama was happy and died in peace, since he did not break the fence set up by our sages." Rabbi Ishmael then shared a quote from the book of Ecclesiastes: "Whoever breaks down the fence is bitten by a snake."

What is this text trying to teach us?

Ben Dama is bitten by a snake. Healing is there but it is across the line. It is beyond our boundaries, beyond our brotherhood beyond the border. The text that tells us who we are won't allow us to risk losing our identity even in to save ourselves. Better to die of a snake bite than be subjected to the bite of their poisonous ideology.

The rabbis who wrote this text were saying to us- its important to know who you are but you need others. Even the people most threatening can be holding the very thing that can save you.

Rabbi Ishmael stands guard at the wall that Chabon calls us to knock down.

Are the people sitting in the beautiful Alon Shvut yeshiva building across from the dilapidated school in Bet Zakaria my people? Yes they are. And I will never stop trying to see that.

Is Ahmad a human being like me? Yes he is. And I will never stop trying to see that.

I refuse to add to the polarization plaguing our world. God forbid we end up so divided that the very thing we need to heal ourselves and the world is within reach but our stubbornness prevents us from accessing it.

There is much fear in the world right now. The lines are brighter, deeper and starker.

If we didn't have lines we wouldn't know who we are and yet the more we draw them the harder it is to know the other.

As we draw our circles tighter politically, religiously, racially and nationally we do so on a planet that spins and arcs closer to and farther away from a sun that is burning finite helium.

My faith is not that the sun won't burn out, its in the miraculous fact that we were gifted the ability to cling to a sphere traveling through space at 67,000 miles an hour close enough to the sun for its light to warm our faces no matter what we look like, where we come from or what we believe.

The sun crosses all distance to give light to all. It turns out the Sun is the most accepting body in our midst. What are we each willing to do to step up to the line and put our toe across it, to work towards acceptance between brothers and strangers before the sun fully accepts us all?

I hope we don't need 5 billion years to figure that out.

El Rachum v'Chanun- God of Mercy, God of Grace. We are here because we sense that there is more to our lives than what we experience everyday. Sometimes we catch glimpses of a dimension of life that is heartbreakingly precious. We are here to open our hearts to that connection. We return to our lives realizing that in fact you give us opportunities to live this life of meaning every day. Every human being we encounter everyday is a gateway. May we begin the journey towards you not step by step but person by person.

Amen