Words to Share – Meir

I’d like to share a few words at the conclusion of these four days, which have had a profound effect on me. During these four days, we experienced with great intensity the moral costs of the continuation of the present reality of the conflict. We explored in depth the heavy moral price of controlling another people, of the occupation. We came to understand that the way we act in the context of “conflict management” may meet the legal tests of Israeli law and sometimes even the tests of international law. Thus, it may be that evicting a family from their home in Sheikh Jarrah or Silwan will stand the legal test, but this does not in any way reduce the moral burden and injustice involved in these actions.

There is an issue that we hardly raised this week, but I feel the need to mention. From personal experience, I am well aware of the moral aspects of the security operations required to protect the movements and the lives of Israelis traveling to and from their homes in the West Bank. So that you can understand the complexity of my situation, you should know that this includes two of my beloved children and seven of my grandchildren, who live in Efrat; my sister, who lives in Beit El Bet; my brother, in Ma’ale Adumim; and my niece, who moved to the Kfar Hateimanim neighborhood in Silwan about a month ago and is enthusiastic about the ideological significance of the move. I pray that everyone – they and the members of their communities – will arrive home safely, and at the same time I am aware of the moral costs involved in ensuring their safety.

As someone who is rooted in the web of meaning of the Jewish tradition, allow me to reflect on what we have experienced through the fundamental categories of this tradition. First, I did not know how painful it would be for me to hear Sam’s remarks on social justice as a central element in Judaism. Sam attacked me in my most vulnerable spot. I choked up as he spoke, and I admit there were tears in my eyes. If I were to respond to him, I would use the words that Rabbi Yehuda Halevi attributed to the Jewish sage in his book *The Kuzari*: “You have found my shameful place.”

In Judaism, there are positive commandments, obligations, and negative commandments, prohibitions. Naturally, all our tours and conversations this week filled my mind with prohibitions. Here is a partial list:

* Do not evict people from their homes
* Do not deprive people of the fabric of their lives
* Do not destroy and do not expropriate
* Do not pervert the law
* Do not shame or humiliate
* Do not defraud the stranger
* Do not beat or abuse
* Do not discriminate and do no evil

I could go on and on. You are welcome to complete the list.

Is it possible to control another nation, maintain an occupation, and obey these prohibitions? I suggest that everyone think about their answer to this question.

But as we have come to the end of our program, and given that we are not necessarily at the forefront of the daily friction with the Palestinians, I feel that we also need a positive commandment that we can take home with us. Although I wrote these words in the early morning, in some ways this is the same question that Leah posed at the opening meeting this morning, and which Sarale, Elkanah, and Naomi addressed.

I thought of two positive commandments that I would like to offer.

The first is the commandment to remember.

In Judaism, there is a commandment to remember. We are commanded to remember the act of Creation through the Sabbath. We are commanded to remember the Exodus from Egypt. Through the commandments of wearing *tzitzit* and affixing a *mezuzah* to our doorposts, we are obligated to remember all the other commandments. The list goes on.

A word on memory: memory is a central anchor in tradition. Some might go so far as to say that all of Jewish tradition extends from the memory of the very first day of Creation to a vision of the final day, but that lesson is for a different day.

What is this commandment of remembrance that I wish to offer?

I would like to remember Abu Ibrahim from Khirbet Zakaria, Zohair from Silwan, the older couple from Sheikh Jarrah (I’m sorry, I do not remember their names), Mazen from the Dahisha refugee camp, Lama from Dura, Sam from Ramallah, and yes, even Mahmoud, even though his words were infuriating sometimes, plus the many others we met and those whom we did not.

I want to remember that every day that the conflict continues, is managed, or whatever we call it – every day, no matter what explanations we give ourselves, whether they are substantive explanations or just excuses – every day we continue to commit injustice. It is worth reviewing Daniel Bartel’s book *Living with the Conflict*, which describes the mechanisms that allow us to live a normal life during the conflict and even continue to see ourselves as moral people.

I would like to remember that every day that we do not work to end the occupation, the moral clock is ticking, the ethical prices are piling up, and the mirror held up to our morality – the reality of life for the Palestinians – is becoming increasingly unbearable.

In Jewish tradition, memory is not just a matter of consciousness. Anyone who is familiar with the historian Chaim Yosef Yerushalmi’s book *Zakhor* knows that memory is realized through action, by designing practices that help preserve it.

He is right. Let us contradict the Prime Minister’s statement about Israelis who get up in the morning and do not think about the conflict. Let’s wake up every morning and take a few minutes to remember this experience we went through. Let’s open our eyes every morning, climb out of our seemingly safe shells like slugs, and be exposed for a little while. I strongly identified with Naomi’s remarks this morning. For quite a few years, I, too, have been a slug, exposed, in the context of the conflict. It is difficult to breathe. But each and every one of us can be a slug for a few minutes. Let’s dedicate a few minutes each morning to the people we met here, to remembering and to observing. Each of us can do this in our own way, whether by reading Amira Hass with the morning coffee or in any other way that stirs the memory.

This is the first positive commandment: the commandment to remember.

The second positive commandment: act to end the conflict.

All the commandments of remembering in the Torah create an infrastructure for other commandments that involve action. Remember the Sabbath day in order to keep it. Wear *tzitzit* and affix a *mezuzah* on your doorpost so that you will remember to do all the commandments. Remember the Exodus from Egypt so that you will treat everyone properly – stranger, resident, and citizen. Remember what Amalek did to you, so that one day you may erase his memory. How fortunate that our sages, almost two thousand years ago, removed that call for genocide from the Jewish system of commandments.

The commandment to remember that I have proposed must also lead to action. Yes, Sarale, there are some of us who need the process, the transition time, the processing of the experience. But we are in a moral emergency, and we must act. It is true, we do not always know what to do, or how to have an impact. As someone who has been involved in the commandment of remembering for years – as someone who, like Naomi, cannot avoid seeing the injustice – I too sometimes find myself feeling powerless, helpless, not knowing what can be done. But ignorance does not absolve us from the duty to act, each and every one according to his or her ability.

I would like to mention two verses of Torah: “Seek peace and pursue it” and “Ask for the peace of Jerusalem.” The words “seek” and “ask” are not what I did this morning when I prayed to “Make peace upon us” or when I said the verse that I really like at the end of that blessing: “and may it be good in your eyes to bless your people Israel with your peace.” This is not the meaning of “Seek peace” or “Ask for the peace of Jerusalem.” In the Torah, the words “seek” and “ask” are a call to action.

I would like to adopt, as a second positive commandment, the commitment to act to end the conflict: “Seek peace and pursue it” and “Ask for the peace of Jerusalem.”

A final word: for quite a few years now, I have been immersed in studying issues related to the conflict, reviewing previous negotiations, talking to interested and experienced parties, participating in dialogue groups with Palestinians that deal with the concrete issues on the table, in hopes that we will all sit around the table one day in the process of resolving the conflict. The more I have researched, the deeper I have looked, the more my faith has grown, and this seminar has only added to that. If we seek peace, we will find it.