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SPECIAL EDITION

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# Israel at War

## FROM THE EDITOR

The premise of Dara Horn's 2018 novel *Eternal Life* is simple: a first-century Jerusalem Jew, Rachel, makes a bargain with God. The deal she makes, not long before the Roman siege of the city, saves the life of her son Yohanan, who is desperately ill; in exchange, she and Yohanan's father give up their mortality. Yohanan grows up to be the Yohanan ben Zakkai of rabbinic legend, carried out of the city in a coffin to meet with the Roman general Vespasian, who gives him permission to lay the foundations of rabbinic Judaism in the town of Yavneh.

I've been thinking a lot about Rachel in the weeks since Hamas's attack on southern Israel and, in particular, about the character's struggles to understand her son Yohanan's greatest choice, namely, to let go of the second Temple and to invest instead in Torah, the teachings and the story of the Jewish people. Lying on his deathbed, he tells his mother:

"When Vespasian asked me what he could give me, I knew exactly what to ask for. I asked for permission for the Torah scholars to be protected near their garrison in Yavneh. That way, no matter what happened to Jerusalem, there would still be people who could teach the Torah in the future. That way the Torah would be safe.... I did what I could. I did what was possible."

"You're like a child! You saved your favorite book!" [said Rachel.]

"Yes! Because nothing matters but the story!... I saved what mattered most in the world... I saved the future."

The persistence of Jewishness as a way of life, as a worldview, and as an identity, over so many centuries, owes plenty to conditions beyond Jewish control. Think, for example, of the Persian Emperor Cyrus' decision to allow Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple—the very one the Romans would later destroy—or, more recently, how Jews have thrived under the freedom of religion promised by the American Bill of Rights.

But, even so, the transformation of Judaism from a religion of prophecy and sacrifice into one of prayer and study in the years before and after the destruction of the Second Temple tells us a lot more about survival than any other explanation. At this and other key inflection points, Jews reinvested in Jewishness not only by continuing to teach their story but by changing it so that it would make sense in a new reality. The rabbinic Judaism that—whether you embrace it or reject it—is the foundation of Jewish practice today was made possible because it was made necessary.

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I know I am not alone in feeling seismic shifts in the meaning of Jewishness in the weeks since October 7. Jewish history suggests we are right that this moment is indeed changing us, as a people, as other tragedies of this scale have done. Jewish history also suggests that we cannot remain passive but must choose to take control, to whatever degree we can, of that change. We must reshape at least as much as we are being reshaped. Like Yohanan, we must ensure that Torah is taught, even and especially, as we bend the narrative arc of the Jewish people to fit a new reality.

The eight articles in this special digital-only edition of *Sources* seek to do just that: to find meaning in looking at the Jewish past, present, and future anew, cognizant of our pain and ready to rethink and respond.

The issue opens with [Yehuda Kurtzer's](#) “moral map” for the moment: an outline of four commitments that guide diaspora Jews as we walk in a terrain that is both familiar and wholly unfamiliar. None of these commitments is brand new; they will all resonate and yet, as he argues, at the same time, they are newly pressing.

Two authors consider the role of rabbinic leadership after October 7. [Mishael Zion](#) offers a moving account of how he and other Israeli rabbis responded to needs of their fellow citizens, sharing the blend of biblical, rabbinic, and Israeli texts that they used as a means of providing spiritual and practical support. [Katja Vehlow](#), an American rabbi and hospital chaplain, draws on Jewish sources as she reflects on being present with people in pain as she herself was in pain, and on chaplaincy as a multifaith endeavor.

Several of our writers focus on Jewish texts, each in a different way. In her examination of the biblical narratives of Job and Lamentations, [Leora Batnitzky](#) finds a vocabulary for the emotional confusion of the last weeks, while [Mikhael Manekin](#) finds clarity as he makes a case for prioritizing the release of hostages with his reading of rabbinic, medieval, and contemporary Jewish legal texts. Finally, [Shlomo Brody](#) considers Jewish laws of warfare—many of them written in a time when there was neither a Jewish state nor a Jewish army—and the moral concerns they raise.

[Geoffrey Levin](#) places today's Israel-Hamas War in historical perspective, and, in looking at how American Jews reacted to earlier Israeli wars, he makes some predictions about the near-term future. Finally, [Sarah Wolf](#) addresses her piece to her fellow Jewish Studies professors, making a plea for remaining engaged in academic life despite the risks posed by increasing antisemitism on so many university campuses.

These are turbulent times punctuated by moments of moral clarity and moments of utter uncertainty. On the Day After, whenever it arrives, we will be different than we were on the Day Before. Join me in taking thoughtful responsibility for that project.

[Claire E. Sufrin](#)

# Torah for a Time of War: A Moral Map for an Impossible Present

**Yehuda Kurtzer**

**Yehuda Kurtzer** is President of the Shalom Hartman Institute and co-editor of *The New Jewish Canon*.

In the first few fragile days following the Hamas assault on southern Israel on October 7, it was hard to know what to think, much less what to do. The magnitude of the tragedy was so enormous and its brutality so savage that those of us who could only watch from afar—who could not participate in burying the dead, building a support network for displaced Israelis, or preparing for battle—could only sit in shock and in grief as an unimaginable story unfolded before our eyes.

Over those first few days and then weeks, I found meaning and solace in the Jewish tradition's legal and customary framework for death and mourning: *aninut*, the period before burial, when the Mishnah teaches<sup>[1]</sup> that one who has a dead body for whom they are responsible to care and to bury, is exempt from the obligation to pray; *shiva*, the strangely social but still hushed week of visiting mourners and creating a cocoon of comfort and community for them; and, at thirty days after burial, when *shloshim* marks the next step in the mourner's return to regular life.

I also found myself using traditional interpretive frameworks to give shape to those first frightening and furious days; I defaulted to the language of Jewish collective memory as a means of to make a small degree of sense out of an anti-Jewish barbarism that I recognized from studying Jewish history but had never seen before in my lifetime. It is a normal Jewish activity to wonder, I wrote that week, where we have seen stories like this before, and what the present reminds us of in our past.<sup>[2]</sup> These are coping mechanisms and a means of strengthening our resolve to survive.

But for better or worse, October 7 was bigger than the halakhic and liturgical prisms of mourning and more than another lachrymose moment in a terrible history. October 7 started a war; October 7 constituted another violent chapter in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; October 7 signaled a major volley in what could constitute a massive regional conflagration, initiated and ignited by Iran; October 7 is another crucible for Israel's contested leadership, and an interruption in a yearlong domestic battle about the future of its democratic norms and institutions; October 7 triggered major efforts to sustain global Jewish solidarity, as well as a spike in global antisemitism and some increasingly tense dynamics between Zionists and others across liberal institutions.

We now need a complex way of thinking about the diverse and intersecting set of issues raised by the war, and a heuristic that enables us to make sense of what it means to be a Jew right now. We need a "*torah*," a teaching, for this war. I offer the following as a "moral map": a framework for ethical thinking that consists of a set of concrete moral commitments that can define the uncertain terrain of issues raised by the war. I am thinking more prescriptively than descriptively and so, for this exercise, I am interested in commitments to concrete Jewish ideas and values. I hope that we as Jews can confront what is before us more comprehensively, and that the language of our tradition can help us hold ourselves accountable.

The metaphor of a map helps us to see that having core commitments means that though the war in Israel could last for longer than we think, and though its consequences and ramifications are still unknown, we will be able to find our way forward. It also recognizes that we will be pulled in different directions, and that our moral voice will be needed on multiple fronts at the same time. By placing our commitments on a map, we know that they are shared and interconnected commitments, even if we find ourselves at different locations on the map at different times.

The moral map I am offering consists of four overarching commitments: peoplehood, or solidarity, and what it demands from us; sovereignty, and the responsibility of the State of Israel for what transpires in and at its borders; democracy, as an operating system, as the aspiration of the state, and as the essential infrastructure for the safety and security of Diaspora Jews; and power, for both the dignity it offers and the restraint that it demands.

### **The First Stop on the Map: Peoplehood & Solidarity**

The response of most American Jews to the October 7 attacks was an overwhelming outburst of solidarity and the expression of a commitment to Jewish peoplehood. In retrospect, this was not a given. Many of us have argued for decades, with concern and urgency, that the sense of Jewish peoplehood—and with it, the experience of shared fate, or a sense of having a shared destiny—that characterized American Jewish attitudes after the Holocaust and during the birth of the State of Israel was eroding as a result of geographic difference, ideological difference, and the

passage of time.[3] I was energized by the massive visceral response of American Jews to the tragedy in Israel, almost like a muscle memory of shared suffering; and I worried, almost simultaneously, whether it would fade as the narrative shifted from “pogrom,” with Jews as victims, to war, with Jews having agency. Would the moral impulses of American Jews be able to sustain a commitment to Jewish solidarity even as we would surely be stretched into assuming a more critical posture as the war continued? Would liberal American Jews resume their distance?

I have been pleasantly surprised, and relieved, to see that the culture of solidarity has been sustained. Attendance at Jewish communal gatherings, whether at rallies supporting Israel or regular synagogue services and Hillel Friday night dinners has been massive and unprecedented, signaling that Jews still possess an instinct to seek community in times of crisis. Together with approximately 289,999 others, I attended the March for Israel rally in Washington on November 14, which appears to have exceeded the high-water mark of the 1987 rally in Washington on behalf of Soviet Jewry, long understood by Jewish communal leaders as the last great time when American Jews were capable of uniting, mostly, with one voice. The rally managed to attract a wider tent on Israel than I would have thought possible, incorporating both evangelical Christians and the “peace bloc” of the Zionist left; and it proceeded without inflammatory rhetoric and without incident. Fundraising campaigns for war relief in Israel undertaken by legacy American Jewish organizations have been staggeringly successful, even reaching levels last seen in 1947. These demonstrate that our ability to organize the Jewish community in a time of crisis remains intact, despite mounting threats to “the establishment” that we have seen and heard over the past few decades. The Jewish community has also shown its strength politically, as public officials have overwhelmingly expressed support for Israel and the Jewish community and provided funding for Israel’s war effort and for the Jewish community’s fight against antisemitism.

This surprising demonstration of solidarity among American Jews mirrored the surprising solidarity of Israeli society in response to October 7. Immediately before the war, Israelis were as divided politically as they have ever been after 40 consecutive weeks of massive protests against the government’s efforts at radical judicial reform. The October 7 attacks reawakened a shared concern about the urgency of self-defense that runs from left to right in Israel. This did not end the political divides, though in some ways it forced them to the side (probably only temporarily). When some of the organizations that had been at the head of the protest movements in Israel now lent their frameworks to relief efforts, they were not conceding their claims against a government they oppose; rather, they were expressing the patriotic claim that citizens must take responsibility for their society’s most urgent needs in a new way. At a moment when they are particularly angry at their government’s failure to protect them, Israelis seem to understand intuitively that solidarity is more than an ideal. It is an essential commitment to help a society navigate through a difficult time, especially when external threats are more dangerous than internal ones.

Still, I remain concerned about the Jewish community's capacity to maintain a solidarity ethic. Solidarity is often misunderstood as homogeneity, and bad actors exploit calls for solidarity to litigate old grievances, to narrow the tent of Jewish communal belonging, and to suppress dissent. If the point of solidarity is that it offers the safety of others and the comfort of belonging, we must strive to make the circles of inclusion *wider* in these moments, not narrower.

At the same time, there are Jewish, anti-Zionist organizations and individuals using this moment to stand in clearer opposition to the mainstream Jewish community and to the State of Israel even more than they have before. They too are appealing to solidarity, in this case with their allies on the left and with the Palestinian people, as a means of movement-building. As both camps deepen their solidarity ethic with their stakeholders, it is reasonable to expect that the divide between the Zionist and anti-Zionist segments of the Jewish community are going to reach real and irreversible breaking points because of this war.

Many Zionist Jews, even on the liberal left, have discovered that their ties with allies in other faiths and ethnic groups were weaker than they had thought, another casualty of the way that war polarizes us and forces the redrawing of group lines into oppositional camps rather than complex networks. It is a reasonable response to both trends for American Jewish groups and institutions to redraw their own alliances in turn—to renegotiate the rules of belonging in Jewish life and to rethink what we want and need out of allies even after decades of hard-won accomplishments. One clear takeaway already is that liberal Zionists will have to be much more explicit about our commitments rather than assuming that our allies will respect our ambivalence on Israel and still know exactly how to support us when we need them.

Finally, at the time of this writing, some 240 hostages sit in Gaza, their whereabouts and condition entirely unknown. Over the last several weeks, scholars of different political persuasions have unearthed millenia worth of different prayers and laws showing that communal responsibility for freeing our abducted brothers and sisters is one of the oldest and greatest commitments of Jewish peoplehood. Helping to free hostages is exactly the kind of Jewish activity that proves the idea of peoplehood: in moments of crisis, we do not care about your politics; we are bidden to seek your safe return at whatever cost. There are some who are trying to argue that advocating for the hostages and supporting Israel's war efforts are mutually incompatible, a position that the IDF contests; the instinct towards solidarity pulls us in different directions, and it would be a tragic irony if the same instinct succeeded at dividing us.

Solidarity, then, is our first moral commitment: we need to solidify Jewish community in this moment, no doubt with a new set of rules and a bit of a reckoning, without shrinking its bounds. This means maintaining a sufficiently united public presence that will help alleviate the essential loneliness Israelis are experiencing, continuing support of Israel through this war and paying attention to the ramifications of a solidarity ethic here for the boundaries of our community and for the future of allyship. We will need to do this even as a brutal war will become more brutal



and even as we find ways to tolerate and promote diverse opinions about war tactics and Israeli democracy in ways that echo the conversations that Israelis themselves will be having.

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### **The Second Stop: Sovereignty**

Zionism's most significant transformation of the Jewish condition was not the migration of Jews from one part of the world to another, but that the establishment of the State of Israel gave Jews control of the tools of statecraft and membership in the family of nations. Diaspora existence had been rooted in ambiguous otherness: at times Jews could be proximate to the halls of power and could benefit from its privileges, and at other times not. Sovereignty reversed the dynamic. To be sovereign is to be in charge, and thus to be responsible for whatever transpires within one's borders. The reality of the Jewish state demands a shift in mindset.

Tal Becker often describes this as the challenge for Israel to operate with “a sovereign state of mind.” It is easy, when you face existential threats and when you are the bearer of a traumatic memory of past existential threats, to relinquish responsibility and to capitulate to fear. The harder challenge for Zionism, and a pre-condition for its fulfillment, is accepting that every single aspect of what takes place in Israel's sovereign borders takes place under the auspices of the state. Jews must accept that as a normative reality, and Israel must govern accordingly.

It has been astonishing and horrifying, as Israel fights an essential war on its southern border and fortifies its northern border, to see the collapse of Israeli police and military responsibility in the West Bank and the rise of settler vigilantism against Palestinians, as well as the relentless fearmongering and seeding of suspicion—not to mention violence, either with state sanction or in the state's absence—against Palestinian citizens of Israel. There can be no rationalization of the state's failure to protect its citizens or the people it is responsible for under occupation. I personally support pursuing an end to occupation in the West Bank. A commitment to peace and justice for both Israelis and Palestinians, who I see as interdependent, is essential to my Zionism, but even for those who are willing to abide the status quo in the West Bank, the failure to protect its inhabitants must be understood as a source of shame. What is the point of leading a

state if you are willing to abdicate the core responsibility of protecting the people under your watch?

Deuteronomy 21 imagines a legal scenario ensuing from the discovery of a dead body in the open land between two towns in the land of Israel. In this case, as explained by the Talmud<sup>[4]</sup> and later applied metaphorically to indict Israeli actions in southern Lebanon by the Israeli Supreme Court's Kahan Commission in 1982, the leaders of the nearest town must perform a ritual that exonerates them of responsibility for a senseless death that took place under their auspices and that they failed to prevent. More than absolution, the ritual attests to the truth of the matter: they *are* responsible, because whoever is in charge of the public square has to be responsible for whatever transpires in its midst. Sovereignty entails the acceptance, on a national level, that you are not allowed to remain indifferent.

Hamas' act of war violated Israeli sovereignty, and Israel's response is consistent with the rights granted internationally to sovereign countries. No country in the world could abide Hamas' invasion and maintain credibility as a protector of its citizens. By the same token, no country can tolerate vigilantism and structural racism within its borders and maintain credibility that it understands the responsibilities of sovereignty. Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza is intertwined with its responsibilities for Palestinians within its borders.

Zionists must not look away from the ways in which Israel's extreme right is leveraging the Hamas invasion to change the status quo for Palestinians in Israel and in the West Bank. Israel's just cause for war around the world is compromised when extremists turn an Israel-Hamas war into a war between Israelis and Palestinians or, even worse, between Jews and Muslims. An overreach by Israel's extremists will, in the long run, compromise the moral credibility of Israel's claims to sovereignty as recognized in the international community. And we must not look away because an Israeli failure to govern morally becomes a referendum on our Zionist aspirations to be in charge of our own destiny.

One important concrete ramification of this moral commitment is that whatever challenges we American Jews face domestically around interfaith and intergroup allyship, the agenda of building a stronger culture of such cooperation in Israel in the form of shared society work and other efforts at peacebuilding is more urgent than ever. Even if a commitment to solidarity leads many North American Jews to turn inward, we must also be allies to Israelis in building an inclusive culture of solidarity that incorporates both Jews and Palestinians.

### **The Third Stop: Democracy**

Israeli democracy was vulnerable before October 7, and it remains vulnerable. Over the last few months, the Netanyahu administration sought to limit the power of the judiciary as a means of entrenching the ideological positions of its coalition members for years to come, and a wide majority of Israelis were regularly taking to the streets to try to prevent that plan. Netanyahu

entered the war not only unpopular for these shenanigans, but with wide resentment about the military and intelligence failures exposed on October 7.

A serious commitment to democracy does not take a break during a war, and a decision to give Israel's military the benefit of the doubt is not code for supporting the government without judgment or criticism. Striving towards better leadership in Israel which respects the structure and values of liberal democracy is an essential means to fighting the war. A free press, a robust public square, government accountability, and a balanced chain of command are tools in service of a just war fought justly.

In fact, Aharon Barak—the very same Supreme Court justice whose transformation of the Supreme Court in Israel prompted the government's recent judicial reform efforts—wrote with great sensitivity during the Second Intifada that:

The power of the state is essential to the existence of the state and the existence of human rights themselves. Therefore, limitations on human rights reflect a national compromise between the needs of the state and the rights of the individual. This compromise is a product of the recognition that human rights should be upheld without disabling the political infrastructure.... A constitution is not a prescription for suicide, and civil rights are not an altar for national destruction.... The laws of a people should be interpreted on the basis of the assumption that it wants to continue to exist. Civil rights derive from the existence of the State, and they should not be made into a spade with which to bury it.[5]

In responding to the dangers of terrorism in this way, Barak helped shape a language that licenses the state to fight these dangers even by periodically limiting rights as long as it remains committed to liberal democracy.

Israel's liberal democratic character must remain front and center even, or especially, in wartime. As we think about “the next day” in Gaza, we must also ask what it will take for Israel to guarantee its security while also ensuring democratic governance. It is not a coincidence that Israeli security establishment tends to believe that until and unless Palestinian national claims are reconciled with Israeli claims to sovereignty, Israel's safety will never be ensured.[6] There is no such thing as democracy for some within a shared polity.

As Israel acts on its commitment to democracy, American Jews must stay committed to the tools and values of liberal democracy to fight the aftershock battles that the war in Gaza has catalyzed here: erosion of the line between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, clashes between concerns for the safety of American Jews and protection of First Amendment rights to speech and assembly; the deterioration of pluralism in liberal institutions; and the collapse of an independent press in the face of global campaigns of disinformation aided by algorithms that incentivize and reward falsehood.

Wars incentivize anti-democratic behavior because we are inclined to grab onto measures that temporarily limit our liberty in pursuit of safety. Israel will be tested on this front, and increasingly North American Jews are similarly tested as we confront the problem of antisemitism. We will also be challenged because Israel and the North American Jewish community may determine the best balance between security and liberty in different ways, even though our fates are intertwined and even though the spike in antisemitism is a direct result of the war. I have argued before and continue to insist now that the strategies for us to best combat antisemitism are unsexy: they require us to invest in the institutions and infrastructure of democratic culture, including the elite university systems that once served as the liberal ladder for Jewish social and political mobility and now appear to be an obstacle.<sup>[7]</sup> Disproportionate fear, brought on by a sense of vulnerability and an instinct towards solidarity, could make the situation here much worse.

### **The Fourth Stop: Power**

Our final moral obligation is to reckon with the power that the Jewish people, through the State of Israel, now possesses.

North American Judaism has rightly placed concerns for justice and compassion at the heart of our religious vocabulary. We seek to be known as *bnei rachmanim*, a people characterized by compassion. This suggests that we lack the stomach for the fog, complexity, and violence that this war will entail. But we cannot afford to be squeamish when it comes to military agency and the impossible and tragic but necessary choices that an army has to make in wartime.

As Americans, we have the luxury of having only experienced wars from a distance. Intellectually and spiritually, we American Jews are products of a hybrid environment of American exceptionalism and optimism; of Christian hegemony, with its skepticism of empire, its embrace of martyrdom, and its message of “turning the other cheek”; and of Jewish Diasporism, heirs to a rabbinic tradition that was so skeptical of the violent overreaches of the Hasmonean kingdoms that it pivoted our destiny away from sovereignty over land and people into the intimacy of the synagogue and study hall, what the British anti-Zionist literary critic George Steiner called “our homeland, the text.”

The understanding of power, militarism, and self-preservation as moral goods is an essential piece of Zionism, and it too can be supported by the Jewish textual and moral tradition. In the spring of 1967, the philosopher Emil Fackenheim tried to make this case, arguing that “in this present unbelievable age, even a mere collective commitment to Jewish group survival for its own sake is a momentous response.”<sup>[8]</sup> This idea is the basic precondition for a *torah* of the legitimacy and dignity of Jewish power. But in recent years that argument has eroded; it is more common to hear people argue against the very legitimacy of the idea of “survival for its own sake.”

Today, however, questions about the ethical use of power and survival are not theoretical. Israel's war against Hamas is a just war. This is the normative position among Israeli Jews, and the principled position for American Jews is to support them in that fight. The legitimacy of the fight brings with it a set of expectations related to the ethics of war. For Diaspora Jews to be good allies, we must concentrate our attention, and if necessary, our criticism, on the question of whether Israel is fighting this just war justly. This may also require us to be "character witnesses" for the State of Israel rather than standing dispassionately to the side, knowing that the ethics of war tradition is built into the chain of command of the IDF and trusting that it constantly factors into Israeli military decision-making. But we can only do that if we come to terms with the reality of Jewish power, which is a massive generational and educational challenge.

We must also be cautious about assuming that power is always a moral good. Our tradition and our recent history offer many cases of how a fixation with power can be weaponized by immoral actors in the name of Judaism and the Jewish people. Since power can be intoxicating and overly self-affirming, we need guardrails to ensure that it is always an instrument rather than an end. This is the crux of David Hartman's argument in his essay "Auschwitz or Sinai," as he lays out his fear that a culture of victimhood will define the character of modern Israel instead of the more aspirational culture of covenantal responsibility.

A commitment to compassion as an essential feature of maintaining our humanity can serve as a necessary constraint on power without constraining our capacity to fight a war. At key points in the biblical story, from the story of the flood to Moses' intervention at Sinai begging God not to destroy the Israelites, we see God learn that compassion should override the just impulse to kill the sinners. From this, we learn that as human beings created in the image of God, we must also balance justice and compassion at every turn. By sustaining an overflowing and indiscriminating reservoir of compassion for the victims of the power at our disposal—even in a war that we support—we prevent that power from becoming an end-in-itself.

Compassion means that people matter. When the IDF is slandered, and even in moments when I wonder from afar about its strategy, I personalize the IDF by visualizing the faces of my nephews and cousins and friends and colleagues who make up its ranks. This helps me remember that wars are fought by people doing their best, people to whom I ordinarily grant the benefit of the doubt and must continue to do so.

Rhetoric matters too. When Israeli ministers and public officials are reckless or racist with the language they use to describe the enemy or the mission, it undermines the moral legitimacy of the war, and we are right to protest. We dare not look away from the faces of the innocent victims in Gaza, and especially the children. Compassion makes us—and keeps us—human.

As the war drags on, with casualty numbers mounting, a morally serious commitment to power and to compassion creates needed guidance: in the form of support for the tragic necessity of

Israel to wage a war that protects its citizens, and in the form of unending mourning for the innocents caught in its grip.

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Peoplehood, Sovereignty, Democracy, and Power are the core locations on our moral map, but the moral end in war, the only possible moral end, is peace.

Peace is an anchoring aspiration of the Jewish tradition. Our tradition demands of us that we be both lovers of peace and pursuers of peace.<sup>[9]</sup> The image of a pious and well-ordered Jewish household is one that is characterized by *shalom bayit*, a peaceful home. Peace—*shalom*—is the final request we make in all of our prayers; the rabbis praise its characteristics for pages and pages in the Talmud; it is a trait we attribute to God, who can make peace more easily in the heavens than we can seem to muster down here on earth. Most of all, peace is our most profound aspiration for the future, in those conditions that we call “the messianic age.” We pray for peace for ourselves, for all of Israel, and for all the inhabitants of the earth, equally.

And at the same time, the pursuit of peace is full of paradoxes. One rabbinic midrash captures some of the pathos of peacemaking: here, the rabbis begin by noting that Moses disobeys God’s orders in the book of Numbers when he seeks peace with the Emorites before battling them. And yet, when the story is retold in the book of Deuteronomy, the order is reversed as God *instructs* Moses to petition the Emorites for peace before declaring war. The rabbis argue that this was one of the few times where Moses acted on his own, following his own instinct, and God learned a lesson and changed as a result. This homily illustrates the power of peacemaking: when humans pursue peace, we can override even God’s instinct to militancy.<sup>[10]</sup>

And yet, in both tellings of the story, despite attempts at peacemaking, there winds up being war with the Emorites. Peacemaking is an essential and absolute commitment, and sometimes war is a necessity. Sometimes, a war to eradicate an evil opponent— particularly an opponent that will not accede to peaceful terms, who will not abide by the rules of war, who can only engage in a language of violence and force—is a precondition to making peace. Elsewhere in the Talmud the rabbis offer the image of a great educator challenged to handle a combative student, and they admire the ability to draw close with one hand while pushing back with the other. Maybe this too is a language of peacemaking: that we must learn how to always pursue peace even throughout the tragic inevitability of waging war.

I do not intend the moral commitments I’ve outlined above to provide an immediate solution to the current conflict in the same way that some Jewish groups are unyielding in their calls for a ceasefire. A moral map is a case for slower and more serious deliberation because it is a heuristic for moral thinking. It does not offer reflexive responses for all situations. Such partisanship, and the mapping of moral language directly onto clear policy positions, is not credible in this

moment.

All of us are experiencing this crisis in real time. We cannot be certain whether what we are seeing from either media or from Israeli government and Hamas channels is fully accurate. We cannot be certain about the deliberations behind Israel's impossible choices and actions. Rather, we Diaspora Jews are going to have to approach all of this tentatively. Equipped with our moral commitments and maintaining something of a humble and supportive posture towards Israelis as they navigate the realities of this war, we should continue to speak the language of peace; we must always pray for peace, but we dare not make it an unyielding demand. We do not want to live in peace as imposed by an imperial power that suppresses our national aspirations, and we should not seek to impose peace on others by suppressing their national aspirations.

One moral frame is not enough for a war like this; the gift of a complex, multivocal tradition, and of minds and hearts capable of holding multiple commitments at the same time, is rewarded in the promise of some coherence, and perhaps a community of fellow interpreters, as we muddle through the impossible.

## Endnotes

[1] Mishnah Berachot 3:1.

[2] Yehuda Kurtzer, "The Hamas attack wasn't the Holocaust. But it must be understood in terms of Jewish trauma," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.jta.org/2023/10/13/ideas/the-hamas-attack-wasnt-the-holocaust-but-it-must-be-understood-in-terms-of-jewish-trauma>.

[3] Yehuda Kurtzer, "The Deep Sources of a Great Divide," *The New Republic*, September 16, 2018, <https://newrepublic.com/article/151057/deep-sources-great-divide>.

[4] Sotah 38b.

[5] Aharon Barak, The Supreme Court 2001 Term, Foreword: A Judge on Judging: The Role of a Supreme Court in a Democracy, *Harvard Law Review* 19 (2002-2003).

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# From Mourning to Resilience: Community Rabbis Face Israel at War

**Mishael Zion**

**Mishael Zion** is a founder of Kehillat Klausner in Jerusalem and founding director of the Mandel Program for Leadership in Jewish Culture. He was ordained as a rabbi by YCT Rabbinical School in New York and is the author of *A Night to Remember: The Haggadah of Contemporary Voices* together with his father, Noam Zion.

*In memory of Moshe and Eliad Ohayon z"l. inspiring community leaders in life and in death, who fell protecting their home.*

When he first heard that war had broken out, Rav Yehuda Gilad was holding a Sefer Torah. At Kibbutz Lavi, near Tiberias, where Gilad serves as rabbi, no siren went off to disturb their holiday morning. Yet his description of Simchat Torah morning reflects the dilemmas community rabbis across Israel faced in those early hours, as dancing turned into mourning:

I was dancing with a Sefer Torah in my arms when the head of Kibbutz Lavi's security team placed his hand on my shoulder, and whispered in my ear, "Rav Yehuda, keep dancing, but listen closely as I need your advice. Two hours ago, a war broke out in the south. Dozens of terrorists have infiltrated and taken control of a number of settlements. Hundreds of rockets are falling in the area, and as far as Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The Home Front Command has instructed us to maintain our routine, but to be prepared for the possibility of a second front opening up in the north. Should we stop the *hakafot* and inform everyone of the situation, or is it unnecessary for the time being?"

I fell silent, completely in shock despite not yet knowing the full magnitude of what had happened. I asked if the leadership of the kibbutz and the local emergency team were aware of the situation. He confirmed that they knew; we decided together to continue the

dancing.

Our feet were dancing but our hearts were crying. I looked around at the spirited dancers, young and old, who were rejoicing for Simchat Torah without knowing that our country was experiencing one of its darkest hours.

When they began calling up soldiers and reservists, and when terrifying rumors started circulating (we thought they must surely be exaggerated), we officially announced the situation to the community. I instructed anyone who might be called up by the IDF to turn on their cell phones and check if they had been told to report to their units. Minutes later, many of them were in uniform, on their way to the front lines.

Jews will never dance the same way again on Simchat Torah. Gilad's description highlights two defining characteristics of this war: like the Yom Kippur War 50 years ago, this war broke out on a Jewish holiday, placing Israel's religious rituals and holiday cycle at the center of its symbolic narrative. Secondly, with hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens conscripted within 24 hours, this is a war of community mobilization. Israeli community rabbis and leaders are standing at the crossroads of this Jewish symbolism and mobilization.

Rabbinic work relies on a unique toolbox, combining ancient Torah with contemporary community and harnessing the power of protective prayer and therapeutic ritual, while also holding fast to the pillars of intellectual rigor, moral clarity, and emotional presence. In times of war, the need for spiritual and communal leadership increases tenfold. After the calamity of the October 7 attacks, Israeli resilience—our ability to withstand sustained trauma and bounce back powerfully—is needed more than ever, and both rabbis and spiritual communities play a crucial role in building it up.

### ***Am K'she Oref: Between the Battlefield and the Home Front***

The term “home front” captures the challenge of explaining this war beyond the boundaries of Israel. Popularized in England during World War I and II, the expression “home front” refers to the civilian community's ability to sustain multiple attacks, as the British Isles did during those wars. In America, the term has not been relevant since the 19th century, with one brief but unforgettable exception for the 9/11 attack. But in Israel, no sea or ocean separates us from our enemies. The gap between the battlefield and the home front is never greater than 60 minutes, and it can be as short as 60 or even 15 seconds. My Jerusalem neighborhood of Talpote can switch from feeling like a distant home front to a full-on battlefield in a matter of seconds. That happened in 1929, 1948, and 1967, and now, since October 7, we fear it could happen again. One of the admitted aims of Hamas and Hezbollah in this war is turning all of Israel into a battlefield.

Fittingly, in Hebrew, the words used for battlefield and home front suggest the distance from the back of your neck to your nose. The battlefield is called the *hazit* (literally, “face”), and the home front is called *oref*, the back of the neck. This word is best known from the term עַם קָשֶׁה עֹרֶף, *am k’she oref*, “a stubborn-necked people,” which Jews have so often rightly been called, as recently as this year, during the internal strife over Israel’s democracy.

Israel must now become again an *am k’she oref*, but in a new sense: a nation with the most resilient of home fronts, the most resilient back-of-the-neck, as our faces head into battle.

This essay focuses on rabbinic work on the home front, seeking to portray some of the moments my colleagues and I have faced as we sought to comfort the bereaved, to support the families of those serving on the battlefield, and to build communal resilience among the country’s citizens and the Jewish people at large. Most of the stories come from my own corner of the Jewish world—liberal Orthodoxy and post-denominational spaces. Normally, this kind of Judaism is confined to specific Israeli neighborhoods, but like so much that has changed as Israel once again faces a sustained external threat, internal divisions have been sidelined, allowing for new partnerships and surprising collaborations. The most delicate silver linings have appeared during these darkest of times. War is often a catalyst for change, and the groundwork for tomorrow’s Israel is being laid by today’s actions.

Following the trajectory of weeks since Simchat Torah, in this essay I trace five expanding rings of communal work: the bereaved who have lost their loved ones; the families of those at the front; the pained circles of hostages and survivors; wider Israeli society and the story it tells; and the connection among Jews the world over.

This is a record of the small moments of *avodat hakodesh*, holy work, that my generation of community rabbis is undertaking as we humbly join the lines of first responders and community builders in seeking to serve our country and our people in this time of need.

### Unable to Bury, Unable to Speak: Israel’s Private and National *Aninut*

וַיִּדְם אֶהְרֹן.

*And Aaron was speechless.*

(Leviticus 10:3)

The funerals did not begin immediately. In fact, it took almost a week before the first civilian casualties could be identified and then buried. In those long and painful days, families found themselves in an often-overlooked *halakhic* status, *aninut*: the awkward and gut-wrenching gap between death and burial. Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik described *aninut* as “an outcry, a shout, or a howl of grisly horror and disgust.”

The rules of *aninut* are derived from Aaron's deafening silence after his sons are killed in the book of Leviticus. *Halakhah* ritualizes this silence, proclaiming that during *aninut*, one is exempt from prayer, from reciting the *shema* and laying *tefillin*, indeed, exempt from all divine and social positive obligations, until the burial can take place. During *aninut*, God understands that no prayer can be uttered, no meaning can be made.

The tragically prolonged period of *aninut* forced upon the bereaved families this October was not caused by bureaucratic mishandling. The delay was a direct result of the calamitous number of dead. Well-rehearsed emergency protocols, which now seem optimistic, had planned for a maximum of 300 bodies a day. No one was ready for four times that number. Crews of trained rabbis and *chevra kadisha* members volunteered to serve as angels of mercy by identifying the dead. Because they were committed to the most punctilious protocols to avoid tragic errors, the identification took days. Working impossible shifts at the IDF rabbinate base, Camp Shura, these men and women practiced *hesed shel emet*, the truest act of kindness, in the face of the most inhumane horrors. In [a painful piece in Haaretz](#), Rabbi Prof. Nerya Guttel, one of the reservists, described how the words of *Unetane Tokef* rang in his ears as they worked: מִי יִשְׁלָו וּמִי יִתְיַסֵּר “Who in peace and who in torment.”

The delay in identifying bodies also created painful *halakhic* dilemmas. In the battle to save the town of Ofakim, a father and son had left Simchat Torah services to fight off a truck full of terrorists before being killed side by side. By Wednesday, the son's body had been identified, but not the father's. Strict custom is to bury a body as soon as possible, and the *chevra kadisha* scheduled the son's funeral for Thursday evening. But the family pleaded: Let us bury them together. Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Yosef gave the final ruling: *halanat ha-met*, the delay of burial, is justified in such a case. The next day, the father's body was identified, and at 10:30 on Friday morning, I found myself standing with hundreds of people to say farewell to these two men who fought like lions to protect their city. Rabbi Benny Lau opened his eulogy with a searing verse: אֹתוֹ וְאֶת בְּנוֹ לֹא תִשְׁחָטוּ בְּיוֹם אֶחָד “Do not slaughter him and his son in one day.” (Lev. 22:28) But at this point, we knew that this shattering reality was not a rare occurrence, as whole families had been killed on the same day. This was one of the first of hundreds of funerals that took place over an excruciating two weeks, slowly releasing the families from *aninut* and allowing them to put their dearest to rest.

Technically, the status of *aninut* applies only to the bereaved families themselves. But in essence, all of Israeli society was in an agonizing national moment of *aninut*. Our dead were lying before us, yet we could not bury them. Like Aaron, our gaze was frozen on the bodies of our fallen loved ones, and we were silent, we could not speak. Ironically, the fact that there is a word, *aninut*, for our wordless national status, has been an island of consolation in a sea of grief.

Miles away from Israel, in her Shabbat sermon at Central Synagogue in New York one week after the murderous attacks, Rabbi Angela Buchdahl suggested another set of words for this

wordless status: *אין מילים*, *ein milim*, “we have no words,” she called out. Buchdahl analogized this tragic moment to the shift on Simchat Torah from Sefer Devarim—so full of words—to the *tohu vavohu*, the chaos and calamity, of the opening of Sefer Bereishit. Only when God begins to utter words can chaos become order. Buchdahl’s words resonated throughout Israel as **a video of her sermon circulated across Israeli social media feeds**, and then, with Hebrew subtitles added, went viral. At that moment in Israel, we needed an American rabbi to help us say, in Hebrew: *ein milim*. There are no words. That is the essence of *aninut*, and it was felt from the avenues of New York to the streets of Ofakim.

## The Israeli Onion: Forming Rings of Support for those on the Front Lines

*One whose dead is laid out before him  
is exempt from the Shema, from prayer, and from tefillin.*

*The pallbearers and their replacements,  
and all those who are needed to carry the bier,  
are exempt from reciting the Shema;  
those who are not needed to carry the bier are obligated.  
These and those are exempt from prayer.  
(mBrakhot 3:1)*

In the days after the attacks, it felt like everyone personally knew someone affected by the attacks or called to military service. Yet not everyone was equally close to tragic loss or heroic challenge. As Israelis scurried to be of service, the question quickly arose: if I am not in an immediate ring of loss, what is my role in this moment? If my family has not been mobilized to war, what am I to do now?

The mishnah above from tractate Berakhot describes the work of bereavement as an ordering of the community into layers of grief and obligation. It delineates three discrete rings, each with its own role and code of conduct. The mishnah opens with “one whose dead is laid out before him.” Trapped in the horrific first line of grief, the *aveilim*, the bereaved, are fully exempt from any other obligation. Their sole role is to grieve. The second ring, the pallbearers, are understood as all those who serve the bereaved, holding the bed of grief so the family can mourn their loss. The third circle, “those who are not needed to carry the bier,” are nonetheless included in the order of bereavement. This third circle is also crucial. They carry the dual role of supporting the bereaved and the pallbearers on the one hand and maintaining the necessary routines of society in the meantime. Serving in the third circle (and the fourth and the fifth and so on), is often most confusing. I am not needed, what role am I to play? The logic of this mishnah offers sage rabbinic advice and wise community guidance: arrange yourselves in rings of support, recognizing that we all have a role to play in the larger communal task.

The theoretical framework of the mishnah became an organizing principle for us, not only regarding bereavement, but also as communities mobilized to support the war effort. With 300,000 citizens called up for service, we were now a country at war. Some waited to be told what to do, but many simply jumped in and formed new rings, taking on new responsibilities in the many sudden vacuums of need.

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Like many communities, my synagogue in Jerusalem, Kehillat Klausner, quickly worked to support the families of the conscripted, arranging ourselves in rings of service and support. By the Monday following Simchat Torah, a contact person from the community had been designated to serve as the first circle of support for each family in which a parent or a child had been sent off to war. An additional circle was put in place to support the supporters. Other community members volunteered for roles like driving reservists to distant bases, shopping and raising funds. Israeli society had become like the rings of an onion, giving inward support, and being supported from without.

Two weeks in, we were at Parashat Noach, with its metaphors of evil, flooding rain, and the search for solid ground. When I arrived to give my weekly class at Yeshivat Machanayim, I mentioned the metaphorical rings of the onion to the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Sarel Rosenblatt. He offered a different metaphor, inspired by the weekly portion: When light breaks, it can become scattered, or, if the right prism is present, it can bend itself into a colorful spectrum. Our job as community leaders is to serve as a prism through which shattered light can become ordered again, creating a *keshet be'anah*—a rainbow among the clouds.

***Lu Yehi*, Let It Be: Praying with the Families of Hostages and Survivors**

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם כִּי נִשְׁבָּה אָחִיו

*And Abram heard that his brother  
was taken hostage*

As the dust settled and we entered the third week after Simchat Torah, it became clear that beyond the shock of the initial attack, and the developing ground incursion in Gaza, we faced the horror of more than 200 hostages abducted into Gaza. In the week's Torah portion, Lech Lecha, the relatively inconspicuous story about Lot, Abraham's nephew, being taken hostage, took on new relevance. Upon hearing the news, Abraham forms a local coalition of kings and heroically rescues Lot and his family. Yet when telling of Abraham's mobilization, the Torah describes Lot not as Abraham's nephew, but as his brother: "And Abram heard that his brother was taken hostage." The Torah intimates that in times of crisis, all degrees of separation become closer. Every hostage becomes your brother and sister, your son and daughter, your grandfather and grandmother.

In those early weeks, it felt like all Israeli society—and Jews the world over—had this same Abrahamic intuition, resulting in the arrival of truckloads of everything from tactical vests to baked goods. One Friday, a small delegation from our synagogue drove the three minutes it takes to get from Talpiot to Kibbutz Ramat Rachel. A short distance, but worlds apart. We came to offer a hug of solidarity and support to the Engel family, whose son Ophir was kidnapped by Hamas. We came with homemade *challot* in hand for the Engels' Shabbat meal and were flustered and overjoyed to discover that the whole kitchen had already been inundated with homemade loaves from across Israel. The children of Abraham, and we among them, had sought to show this family that, as far as we were concerned, "our brother was taken hostage."

For many communities, this was not a reach. Our friends down the road at the Hakhel community watched in horror as their newly appointed gabbai, Jon Polin, and his wife Rachel Goldberg, took in the news of their son Hersh having been taken hostage. By Simchat Torah afternoon, volunteers from the community were running a full-blown operation from the Goldberg-Polin living room, tracking down his whereabouts. For weeks, the community has convened by Zoom nightly to pray and sing with Jon and Rachel and their daughters. At the time of this writing, the prayers and diplomatic pleas have gone unanswered.

Standing in solidarity with those in the first ring of suffering has also led to larger creative initiatives. When a team of rabbinical students at the Beit Midrash for Israeli Rabbis, a joint program of the Hartman Institute and the Midrasha in Oranim, heard that their fellow student, Avi Dabush, and his community in Nirim had been evacuated to hotels in Eilat, they immediately sent a rabbinic delegation.

Avi had spent 30 hours trapped in his safe room in Kibbutz Nirim, while terrorists murdered his neighbors and burnt down their homes. What can a group of inter-denominational rabbis offer secular Israelis whose homes were just savaged by unthinkable evil? They quickly crafted a unique ritual space, staying attuned to the needs of the survivors themselves. Moving from hotel

to hotel across Eilat and later the Dead Sea and further north, they offered song and prayer to the survivors of Kibbutz Nirim, Kfar Azza, Reim, Kerem Shalom, Ofakim, and Sderot, and the survivors responded to the healing power of music, Hebrew verse, and human connection. As Hazzan Nerya Knafo later [described it in a Facebook post](#):

We met hundreds of people from eleven different kibbutzim and towns, in six different hotels. Some wanted to say Kaddish for their murdered relatives, some wanted to pray for the healing of the wounded, some for the hostages. Others wanted to *bensch Gomer* together. With all of them we prayed for the success and protection of our soldiers, and for peace to all.

There were moments in which we sat in silence with three kibbutz members in the lobby and moments in which we sang with dozens. Moments in which they shared their tears and moments in which they cried silently. Moments in which the songs stung with pain and moments when they were overcome with joy. The stories told were big and small, some expressing tremendous power and others reflecting utter and complete powerlessness.

Each of the stories could have been turned into a whole movie.

We performed this strange tour of sorts in a group of ten men and women rabbis and rabbinical students, each bringing their strength and sensitivity. We supported each other with a glance of the eye, a hug, a kind word, some food. We knew we were on an important mission and pushed all other things aside.

At the end of each meeting, we hugged the survivors, looked them in the eyes, and promised aloud: we are a resilient people. We will stand by you as we rebuild your dignity, your trust, and your homes.

Many graduates of the Beit Midrash and other rabbis joined subsequent initiatives. I had the privilege of joining a prayer circle in Kibbutz Ein Gedi on the Saturday night two weeks after the attacks. We met with the survivors of Kibbutz Holit, where 14 of the 84 Kibbutz members had been slaughtered in their homes. We offered consolation with Israeli music and worked to ward off the darkness with a Havdalah service. When we began singing Naomi Shemer's anthem, *Lu Yehi*, famously written in the depths of despair during the 1973 war, Miriam from Holit burst into tears, saying: "When I saw you on the lawn with your guitars and your *kipot*, at first I thought, oh no, those religious people. What can they offer me? But then you came with an open heart and with Naomi Shemer. I used to find very little to connect to in her songs. Those are the words of the older generation, they don't speak to me, I used to think. But then we sang this verse:

In a small shady community,  
a modest house with a red roof



all that we ask, let it be.

Summer ending, the journey too,  
let them return now to their home  
all that we ask, let it be.

All of a sudden I realized,” Miriam said, “this is my story. I used to have a modest house with a red roof. But I don’t have that anymore. All I have is a prayer: *Let them return now to their home*. I’ve been avoiding crying these past two weeks. But thanks to this prayer circle, I could cry properly for the first time.”

In that moment, I felt as though the gears were shifting, as Miriam—and all of us witnesses there—were able to move beyond *aninut* and *shiva*. The unspeakable had been verbalized, the sorrow over the home that was no longer had been articulated, and only now the prayer for what might be, *lu yehi*, could be uttered.

### Torah in Times of Solidarity: Widening the Moral Imagination

As a community rabbi, one must ask each week: What is the Torah that must be taught at this time? During times of war, what emerges is a Torah of solidarity and connectedness, a Torah of moral judgment, a Torah of empowerment, of putting oneself at personal risk for a higher cause. But solidarity can make us myopic, and self-righteousness often blinds the eye to a wider framework. As the Israeli and Jewish rings of solidarity tightened, it became clear that it was crucial for Israel’s rabbis and storytellers to include stories of those who we often overlook. The bravery of Haredi first responders and of Bedouin families who saved Jews under fire—even as they themselves suffered grave losses from Hamas, including multiple hostages—must also be told.

Arab citizens of Israel, many of whom found themselves caught between their concern for family members in Gaza or the West Bank, and their sense of belonging to Israeli society, also require our attention. We must amplify stories such as the one about two Arab Israeli football teams that began their match with a moment of silence in memory of the Israelis killed by Hamas. These will be crucial narratives as we seek to rebuild Israeli society. A society’s ethos is shaped in the high temperatures of wars and crises. The wider we cast our net of storytelling, the wider the ethos of Israeli solidarity can become.

But what about Palestinian residents of this land who do not support Hamas, yet find themselves in the impossible crucible of the IDF’s attack and their own captivity under Hamas’s sinister rule in Gaza? What words does the Torah have to help us examine this moment? Even as Israel is forced to bend with the power of *din*, judgment, I asked my community to not lose the prayer of *hesed*, of compassion, for all of Abraham’s sons. When the weekly Torah portion of Vayera

arrived, I focused on Abraham's prayer for the people of Sodom. Even when Abraham understands that Sodom must be destroyed, he still prays for *rachamim*, for mercy, over them. When we reached Parashat Chayei Sarah, the image of Isaac and Ishmael coming together to mourn their father despite their differences raised the possibility of a prayer for the time when building peace between rival brothers would again be possible.

## Aharon and Hur: Holding Each Other's Arms Up High

וַיְדִי מֹשֶׁה כְּבָדִים וַיִּקְחוּ אָבֹן וַיִּשְׁימוּ תַּחְתָּיו וַיֵּשֶׁב עָלֶיהָ

וְאַהֲרֹן וְחֹר וְחֹר תִּמְכוּ בְּיָדָיו מִזֶּה אֶחָד וּמִזֶּה אֶחָד

וַיְהִי יָדָיו אֱמוּנָה עַד בֹּא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ

*Now Moses's hands were heavy.*

*They took a stone and placed it under him, and he sat on it.*

*Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one from this side, and one from that side;  
and his hands were faithful until sunset.*

Exodus 17:12

As Israel reached 30, and then 40 days since Hamas's murderous attacks, it became clear that Hamas is not attempting to threaten Israel's military might. Instead, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran's other proxies have their sights aimed on Israel's social resilience. As the Israeli strategists put it, this is not an existential threat (איום קיומי), but rather an existential "gnawing" (פְּרִסּוּם קִיּוּמִי), slowly and methodically undermining Israeli resilience. In this kind of war, there is no difference between the *hazit*, the battlefield, and the *oref*, the home front. In fact, as with the attacks in Be'eri and Ofakim, sleepless nights and fear-filled living rooms are the aims of these attacks. Understanding this strategy means that our counterstrategy must place individual and community resilience at the center. It is community leaders—rabbis and social workers, musicians and poets, journalists, and social media influencers—who are key to building that resilience. Moreover, because of the sense of support a worldwide coalition gives us in Israel and in light of emerging threats and attacks on Jews around the world, the campaign for communal resilience is one in which all world Jewry has a role.

Community rabbis and leaders are well practiced in the wisdom and strategies of increasing resilience, and we know how to work in tandem with diverse communities to build that resilience where it is most needed. We must approach this challenge together—the rings of the onion holding each other tight, the light of the prism turning from scattered light into one unbroken rainbow.

For one night, I was lucky enough to experience that rainbow myself. When Rabbi Inbar Bluzer Shalem asked if I could join her in organizing a prayer circle for a group of New York rabbis who were coming on an emergency UJA mission, I immediately said yes. I admitted to her it was for the most selfish of reasons: I too wanted to be held by a group of spiritual leaders in prayer. We invited a diverse group of Jerusalem rabbis and prayer leaders to join us. We knew we wanted to do two things that night: to pray together for Am Yisrael in this terrible moment, and to support each other as community leaders.

There are so many who need a prayer and a blessing during this terrible time: soldiers, hostages, and the wounded in Israel, as well as those being targeted by hate and violence in America and the world. Rabbis are called to galvanize others for prayer, support, and solidarity, but who prays for the rabbis? Who will hold the community leaders? We decided to begin the prayer circle with a prayer for each other.

First, Dr. Erica Brown of Yeshiva University stood up. She reminded us of the war with Amalek, the heinous enemy who attacked our weakest links at a time of great surprise. Joshua's sword was needed for this war, but Moses's staff was also needed. Moses held his hands high just as those on the home front, in communities across Israel, are keeping their hands in the air in support of those in battle. But it is hard to keep one's hands held high. It is hard to hold faith in such moments. That is where Aharon and Hur came in. They ascended the hill with Moses and kept his hands held high until the evening came. We are here to keep your hands held high, Erica said. In that moment, everyone felt their hands lifting higher.

Then Rabbi Dr. Shraga Bar-On offered an addition to her prayer. Amalek attacked us in Refidim, which the Talmud interprets as the place of רַפְּיוֹן וְדִימָה, a place of forlorn, exhausted, *refe*, hands. Our Israeli hands are exhausted. Your arrival here, said Shraga, allows us to hold our hands up high again. Because you are here with us. We need all three circles to overcome this attack—those holding the sword of Joshua, those holding the staff of Moses, and those holding Moses's hands up in the air. But this is not just our struggle, it is an attack on humanistic values everywhere. So, in other ways, you are Moses, and we are trying to keep your hands in the air, too. Let us pray that like Moses's hands, יְדֵי יְיָ יָדְיוֹ אֶמְוֶנָה עַד בּוֹא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ—our hands will remain faithful, until the sun of this battle sets.

With our hands held high by each other, we prayed for the State of Israel, for the IDF, for the wounded, and for the hostages. The prayer ended with Buchdahl and a group of Jerusalem prayer leaders, Sefaradi and Ashkenazi, secular, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, in a rendition of “*Al Kol Eileh*.” By the end of it, there wasn't a dry eye in the room. I thought of what I had learned from Miriam of Kibbutz Holit, who had lost her home but not her resilience. She found it in reaching back to her cultural and spiritual assets, with her community singing around her. Shemer's words mixed with the words of Torah that night, and together they felt

more relevant than ever.

As we face the harrowing weeks and months to come, we need our assets of resilience: God's words of light that come out of the chasm of *tohu vavohu*, Noah's prism that bends light into rainbows, Abraham's solidarity with his hostage brother and his undying compassion for all human life, and Moses, Aharon, and Hur working as a team to keep our hands faithful and the battle true. At this moment, the Jewish people need their community leaders more than ever. Leaders of Torah, culture, and spirit. Faithful leaders who can collaborate to keep one another's arms held high. May our hands remain faithful until the sun of this battle sets.

# Mourning and Suffering in this Moment

**Leora Batnitzky**

**Leora Batnitzky** is a Senior Fellow of the Kogod Research Center at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America and Ronald O. Perelman Professor of Jewish Studies and Professor of Religion at Princeton University.

Most of us aren't sitting shiva right now, but we are in mourning. We continue to mourn the brutal murder of 1200 people, and we are filled with deep anxieties about the fate of the hostages in Gaza and the terrible toll of this war on innocent lives in Israel and Gaza alike. But many of us are also in mourning for the sense of security and belonging that we took for granted not long ago. Yes, we were aware of rising antisemitism in the USA and beyond, but we also assumed that acts of barbarism against Jews like those committed by Hamas on October 7 would be recognized for what they are: evil and simply inexcusable. Given some of the responses, or lack of responses, to Jewish suffering, especially at American and Canadian universities, both the Middle East and North America look different to many of us than they did before October 7. We are sad, angry, scared, and confused.

For North American Jews, and perhaps especially for those of us on college campuses, part of what is so frustrating and scary in this moment is the competing univocal and exclusivist narratives we are confronted with, both within and beyond the Jewish community. But in this deeply wretched and bewildering time, it's worth reminding ourselves that many classical Jewish sources, and the Hebrew Bible in particular, are anything but univocal. When compared, for instance, to Christian theology, Jewish thought is often portrayed as less developed, and perhaps less rigorous, because our sources speak in so many voices. But while some may regard this as a weakness, I see it as a strength not only because pluralism is a social good but also, and perhaps more importantly, because life is complicated. Especially when it comes to traumatic moments like the one we are now in, it's a great gift to be able to turn to sources in which we can recognize the complexity, and even the contradictions, of our difficult emotions.

One of the customs of sitting shiva seems to me particularly pertinent now. As part of the initial mourning practice, mourners are not supposed to study or read for pleasure. But there is an exception: mourners may read from the books of Job and Lamentations and from certain parts of the book of Jeremiah. A focus on these texts suggests, as the many rituals surrounding mourning do, that we need to acknowledge our suffering. “Suffering” can take many forms, but on the most fundamental level, suffering is consciousness, or awareness, of our pain, which can be physical or mental as well as spiritual. As responses to suffering, both Job and Lamentations can be read as stressing human inadequacy, whether in the form of ignorance or sinfulness, in contrast to God’s perfection and goodness. Read this way, suffering is understood to be a consequence of human shortcomings. In this vein, both texts can also be read as contending that obedience to God’s voice, as opposed to continued focus on our own sorrow, confusion, and anger, is the only path away from suffering to a better world. At first glance, then, it may seem that Job and Lamentations offer straightforward and easy responses to suffering, from which only traditional believers would be able to take comfort.

But Job and Lamentations are both much more complex than they might initially seem. They certainly can affirm the views of God as almighty and just and ourselves as unworthy and ignorant. But they also embody ambivalences that call these conceptions into question. The power of these texts, I want to suggest, is that they are multi-valent and ambiguous. They do not offer easy answers, and this is why they are appropriate reading for times of mourning in which easy or simple answers are almost always inadequate.

Let’s turn first to Job. As we know, Job did nothing to deserve his suffering. He was a wealthy and pious man whom God admired. But Satan, or a fallen angel, made a bet with God: if Job lost all of his possessions, his family, and even his health, Job would no longer be such a good man. Instead, he would curse God. God took the bet, and Job suffered and continued to proclaim his innocence. Job questioned God’s justice, but did not curse God. Job complained and complained, and God finally did answer him. God did not give Job a reason for his suffering, but instead insisted on God’s supremacy. Where were you, Job, asked God, when I created the earth and the heavens? Can you, Job, do the wondrous things that I, God, can do? In short, God’s response to Job is, “who do you think you are to question me?” And Job answers God and acknowledges that God is indeed God: “I know that you can do everything and that no purpose can be withheld from you.” (42:2) Job recognizes his smallness, indeed his insignificance, in the scheme of God’s creation. Verse 6 of chapter 42 marks Job’s last words to God: “Therefore I abhor my words and repent, seeing that I am dust and ashes.” The chapter ends with God’s restoration of Job’s wealth as well as with a new wife and children for Job. We are told that after his ordeal, Job lived for 140 years, “and saw his sons and his sons’ sons, even four generations. So Job died, being old and full of days.” (42:16-17)

Many have read the book of Job as a theodicy, that is, a defense of divine justice when the innocent suffer. These defenses of God include the idea that human beings cannot understand

God's justice. Another version of this notion is that God has a plan, even if we don't know what it is. If we are righteous, like Job, we will receive our reward, just as Job eventually received his. Yet another rendering of this position is that God not only tests us with suffering but that God especially tests those whom, like Job, God loves most. Some rabbinic texts support exactly this perspective, as we read, for instance, in the collection of rabbinic midrash, Sifrei Devarim:

R. Eleazar b. Jacob says, Behold, it says, 'Do not reject the discipline of the Lord...' For what reason? 'For whom the Lord loves, He rebukes [as the father the son whom he favors]' (Pro. 3:11-12). You say: come and see, what caused this child to be pleasing to his father? Say: suffering.

According to this view, suffering is a sign of God's love, for just as a parent disciplines a child for the sake of the child, so, too, God disciplines the people of Israel for their sake. There may be people right now for whom these classical responses might be comforting.

But for many others, myself included, the injustices of life are too harsh to make such answers palatable. Just as many of us recognize the cruelty and counter-productiveness of harsh parenting, so too many Jews find the notion that God wants us to suffer simply perverse. This is where the text of Job becomes even more interesting. Above, I quoted Job's final response to God: "Therefore I abhor my words and repent, seeing that I am dust and ashes." The word that is translated as "I abhor my words" is **סָנְאָה**. But this word is ambiguous in Hebrew. It literally means, "I despise," and it is the translator who adds "my words." The term for "repent" **נִחַמְתִּי** is also ambiguous. It means "I regret," and it is the same term that God uses in Genesis 6:7 when, in the face of the great wickedness that had developed among people after creation, God regretted creating human beings: "And the Lord said: 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and creeping thing, and fowl of the air; for I regret [**נִחַמְתִּי**] that I made them.'" Notice too that **נִחַמְתִּי** is a play on Noah's name, **נֹחַ**, whose father, Lamech, named him so because the name "will comfort us [**נִחַמְנוּ**] in our work and in the toil of our hands, which comes from the ground which the Lord has cursed." (Gen. 5:29) The biblical play on the same word for comfort and regret allows us to see the Hebrew Bible's appreciation of the complexity of human emotions and realities.

What does all this mean for Job's final statement to God? It is possible to understand what Job says to God as an apology for having questioned God's justice. But it's also quite possible to translate this verse very differently. Rather than an apology, it might be read as something along the following lines: "Therefore I despise you, God, and regret saying what I said because I am dust and ashes." On this reading, Job does not despise the truth of what he has said about God's injustice, but rather he despises the unjust God who has punished him for no reason. In this understanding, Job's regret is for not recognizing beforehand how useless it was to ask God to offer him an explanation for his suffering that would make any sense. Job audaciously demands that God bear witness to the truth of his suffering. Job wants his suffering acknowledged, and if

God cannot do that, then Job will, at the very least, continue to testify to the truth of his experience.

Here we can begin to appreciate that testimony and the demand for recognition of our testimony are not just theological matters pertaining only to our relationship to God. Instead, testimony and recognition are necessary for any human attempt to tell the truth about our experiences of the world, including, first and foremost, our own suffering and the suffering of others. Although this reading of Job's words to God is not a standard one, it arguably coheres well with God's response to Job's statement: "And it was so, that after the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My wrath is kindled against you, and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me correctly, as my servant Job has.'" Recall that Job's "friends" responded to his suffering by accusing him of having done something wrong. Each "friend" encouraged Job to admit that he must have sinned because God would not have inflicted Job with suffering if he hadn't done something to deserve it. Perhaps God recognized that in despising God's injustice, Job had told the truth: he didn't deserve his suffering. It was not just. Perhaps it was God who repented by telling Job's "friends" to offer a sacrifice (42:8) for having spoken wrongly in denying Job's experience of suffering.

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Both readings I have offered of God's response to Job and Job's subsequent response to God are credible. And both responses seem particularly relevant today in our time of mourning. Some Jews have no doubt found comfort in the belief that divine providence both accounts for and will ultimately offer a response to the suffering of the Jewish people. Other Jews will find this view either unbelievable or offensive or both. But the text offers us both positions, and in doing so, gives voice to our sadness, anger, and confusion.

At the same time, and equally important, the book of Job's conclusion offers us an account of what *not* to do when people are in mourning. After losing his family, his fortune, and his health, Job sits on the ground as a mourner does. It is in this mourner's posture that Job's "friends" find him, and it is here that they offer him the heartless response of those who cannot acknowledge



the suffering of the mourner. Regardless of how we read Job's final words to God, God's final statement rebuking Job's "friends," shows us that no matter who the mourner is, they deserve comfort. This means first and foremost recognition that the mourner is *in mourning*. It is exactly this lack of recognition that so many Jews in North America have felt after Hamas's vicious attack. Our tradition teaches us that we do not and should not blame the mourner for his suffering. We must not try to explain suffering away. And here it is worth mentioning that Job is not identified in the Bible as Jewish or as an Israelite. This rightly suggests that suffering and mourning are universal human experiences. When we mourn individually and collectively as Jews, we are in mourning with the rest of the world.

Unlike the book of Job, the book of Lamentations is about a particular people and a particular place. Lamentations, which we read on Tisha b'Av, mourns the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Jews have also long understood Tisha b'Av and Lamentations as commemorating other severe moments of historical Jewish suffering, including the destruction of the second Temple and the expulsions of the Jews from England and Spain, all of which are said to have taken place on Tisha b'Av. Some Jews resisted the creation of a special day of remembrance for the Holocaust, what came to be Yom Hashoah, because they believed Tisha b'Av is a synecdoche for all Jewish sufferings and therefore, that it, along with the book of Lamentations, could accommodate even the horrors of the Holocaust.

The book of Lamentations is harrowing. It describes in acute and concrete detail what utter devastation looks and feels like. Some of the verses from the book's last chapter may seem especially apt after October 7: "They have ravished the women in Zion, the maidens in the cities of Judah. Princes are hanged up by their hand; the faces of elders are not honored. The young men have borne the mill, and the children have stumbled under the wood. The elders have ceased from the gate, the young men from their music. The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning." (5:11-15) After October 7, some Jewish congregations and groups called for a day of fasting and prayer, acting in resonance with Lamentations and Tisha b'Av. By connecting October 7 with Tisha b'Av, these communities also implicitly affirmed one of Lamentations' main themes: "The crown is fallen from our head; woe unto us! For we have sinned" (5:16). This view comes close to affirming not just our sinfulness, but also the value of suffering. Once again, this view is expressed in some of our classical sources, such as the words attributed to Rabbi Akiva in Sifrei Devarim (emphasis mine):

[It teaches] that *a person should be happier with suffering than with the good*, for even if a person experiences good all of his days, he is not forgiven for his sins. And *what causes his sins to be forgiven? Say: suffering*.

Some Jews may find comfort in reading Lamentations at this time, because they see not just a continuity between Jewish suffering of the past and the present, but also a continuity of cause and remedy for our suffering—we have sinned, but if we repent, we will be forgiven. To other

Jews, this reading of Lamentations, if not Lamentations itself, might seem downright offensive. Did the 1200 people murdered and others who were brutalized suffer because of their sins? Perhaps even worse, did these people die and suffer because of the sins of the Jewish people as a whole? This response is disturbingly close to the reaction of those who responded to Hamas's atrocities by blaming Israel. But it is also affirmed by parts of our tradition, contending that those who attack the Jewish people are instruments of God's will. God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus 9:12 is perhaps the most well-known display of this perspective. Indeed, it aligns with the most conventional reading of Lamentations: we have sinned, and our destruction and the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem are God's response to our sins. We can help ourselves by acknowledging our sin and by praying to God in the hopes of reminding God of our covenant.

Just as with the book of Job, Lamentations is not a univocal text. Here we need to start with the name of the book in Hebrew, Eicha אֵיכָה, which is a question, asking *how can it be that this has happened to us?* This question is arguably as much a protest as it is a lament. Did we really deserve this? Even if the adults of Israel have sinned, what about the children who have done nothing wrong? The grotesqueness of such human desolation is captured in 2:20: "Look Lord, and consider, to whom You have done thus! Shall the women eat their children, the children they have cared for?" How, asks Lamentations, can God make this happened? "Surely the Lord's mercies are not consumed, surely His compassions fail not." (3:22) In challenging God's justice, we hear resonances of Abraham's opposition to God's plan to completely destroy Sodom and Gomorrah: "That be far from You to do in this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked...shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?" (Gen. 18:25)

We also hear at least two significant echoes of Job in Lamentations. First, the book refers to God several times as "like an enemy." The Hebrew כְּאֹיֵב ("like an enemy") sounds and looks like Job's name, אִיּוֹב Job pointedly asks God why God treats him like an enemy. (13:24) Once again, we see the ambiguity in the text of Job. Does God wrongly treat Job as an enemy, as Job implies? Or is Job God's enemy because he continues to protest God's treatment of him? Similarly, despite Lamentation's repeated proclamations of the sins of Israel, the text also daringly implies that it is God who has sinned by profaning all that is holy: "The Lord has swallowed up unsparingly all the habitations of Jacob; He has thrown down in His wrath the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; He has brought them down to the ground; He has profaned the kingdom and the princes thereof.... And He has stripped His tabernacle, as if it were a garden, He has destroyed His place of assembly; the Lord has caused Zion to forget its appointed season and Sabbath." (2:2, 6) God acts like an enemy, suggests Lamentations, because God's out-of-control wrath is ultimately responsible for the sins of the people, including their forgetting Shabbat.

This brings us to the second, and perhaps deeper resonance, between Job and Lamentations. Above, we noted the ambiguity of Job's statement, "I despise," אֶמְאָץ. The last verse of

Lamentations (5:22) uses this same word twice. Here it is in Hebrew first: **כִּי אַתָּה-מְאִסָּתָנוּ, קִצְפָּתָ עָלֵינוּ עַד-מָאֵד**. Before translating this verse, it is worth mentioning that although this is the last verse in the book, it is not the last verse that is read when we read Lamentations on Tisha b'Av. Instead, the penultimate verse (5:21) is read again after the last verse: “Turn us to you, O Lord, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old.” This verse coheres well with a traditionalist understanding of sin and repentance. We have sinned, God has punished us, and now we ask God to renew our covenant. The actual last verse of the text quoted above in Hebrew is much more disturbing. If we ignore the first two words for a moment, **קִצְפָּתָ עָלֵינוּ עַד-מָאֵד** means something like “you have utterly despised us and been very angry with us.” The question is what those first two words, **כִּי אַתָּה**, mean? The phrase can be understood as a conditional, such that the verse would read “for if you have utterly despised us and been very angry with us.” But **כִּי אַתָּה** can also mean “unless,” with the verse reading “unless you have despised us and been very angry with us.” This verse could also be presenting an opposition to the previous one, so we would read, “Turn us to you O Lord, and we shall be turned; renew our days of old. But instead you have utterly despised us and been very angry with us.” The first option, which reads **כִּי אַתָּה** as a conditional, doesn't make sense as a concluding verse. But the other two options do make sense, yet they are very disturbing. To put it strongly, both suggest that God has become our enemy, for God has broken the covenant with us, and there is no possibility of renewal or restoration.

The implications of different ways of reading this verse were not lost on the rabbis. One solution they found was to read Lamentations 5:22 in conjunction with Jeremiah 14:19. That verse asks, **הֲמָאֵס מְאִסָּתָ אֶת-יְהוּדָה** “Have you utterly rejected Judah?” and then continues: “Has your soul loathed Zion? Why have you smitten us and there is no healing for us? We looked for peace, but no good came; for a time of healing, but behold, terror!” By bringing these verses together, the rabbis can interpret the end of Lamentations as a question, and not as a statement of fact: “Have you utterly despised us?” instead of “You have utterly despised us.” But if this is indeed a question, then the second part of the verse—“you have been very angry with us”—no longer makes sense. If God has rejected us, that is, if God's rejection is a done deal, then God no longer has cause for anger. In other words, it doesn't make sense to be angry about something that can't be changed. It doesn't make sense to be angry about something that can't be changed. This interpretation is what we find in Lamentations Rabbah: “R. Simeon b. Lakish said: If there is rejection there is no hope; but if there is anger there is hope, because whoever is angry may in the end be appeased.”

We can understand this intervention in terms of our relationship to God. Even if God is angry, anger suggests a relationship. As significantly, we can appreciate this interpretation in terms of our own feelings and ambivalences. Many of us are angry more with other people than with God. But we need not hide from our anger, because anger means that there is hope for a different and better reality. Anger is the opposite of passivity, and it's remarkable, I think, that

the very texts that mourners are allowed to read during Shiva are filled not just with sadness and connection to our collective past but also with anger—which means that they are also filled with hope for a different future.

Even before October 7 of this year, I have thought of Gaza in the last decade and a half when reading Eicha. No text better describes what it's like to literally see one's life and people destroyed. Acknowledging and recognizing the suffering of innocent Palestinians in Gaza does not negate our own suffering. We can, in fact, feel the suffering of others precisely because we, too, suffer. While Lamentations is a book about a particular people and a particular city, its message, like Job's, is universal. Desolation is desolation, no matter where it is and no matter to whom it befalls.

Part of what we learn from the book of Job and Lamentations, I think, is that grief is complicated. We have many conflicting emotions, and we must make room for all of them. We are blessed to be part of a tradition that embraces all aspects of our humanity—our sadness, our anger, our fear, as well as compassion for ourselves and others. This is uncomfortable but it is also reassuring. We are not the first to confront these competing sentiments. And we won't be the last.

# On Redeeming Captives

**Mikhael Manekin**

**Mikhael Manekin** is a Research Fellow at the Kogod Research Center of the Shalom Hartman Institute and at the Harvard Divinity School. He is the author of *End of Days: Ethics, Tradition and Power in Israel*.

The brutality and sadism of the October 7 attacks, frustration with the continuing violence, and dread over what the future might have in store are leaving so many of us sleepless at night. On top of all of these, however, is the hostage crisis. Over 200 Israeli and foreign citizens—men, women, and children, Jews, Muslims, and Christians—were taken captive by Hamas, including some whom we know were wounded during the initial attacks. We know very little about their fate and future as I write this. It is heartbreaking imagining their last weeks, their physical and emotional suffering, their confusion, and their distress. Imagining the agony of their families, waiting to hear what their future holds, is equally painful.

Looking at Jewish writings about hostages anew in this moment sets two priorities above all others. The first is that caring for our hostages needs to be a central organizing goal for the Jewish community at large, high on the agenda of our communal conversation and in our advocacy, as indicated by rabbinic sensitivity to the pain of being held hostage. The second is that the release of Palestinian prisoners in exchange for hostages is justified according to rabbinic sources, which approve of redeeming our hostages through payment, what they call *pidyon shvuyim*. We can understand such an exchange as a manifestation of our care for our hostages.

In Bava Batra 8a, one of the central Talmudic sources that articulates the importance of ransoming hostages, we learn that the pain suffered by hostages is the main reason for our need to focus on their release:

Rava said to Rabba bar Mari: Concerning this matter that the Sages stated, that redeeming captives is a great mitzvah, from where is it derived? Rabba bar Mari said to him: As it is

written: “And it shall come to pass when they say to you: To where shall we depart? Then you shall tell them: So says the Lord: Such as are for death, to death; and such as are for the sword, to the sword; and such as are for famine, to famine; and such as are for captivity, to captivity” [Jer. 15:2]. And Rabbi Yohanan says: Whichever punishment is written later in this verse is more severe than the one before it.

Rabbi Yohanan explains: The sword is worse than death. If you wish, say that this is learned from a verse; if you wish, say instead that it is derived from logical reasoning. [To] say that this is derived by way of logical reasoning, [say]: This punishment, i.e., death by sword, mutilates the body, but that punishment, i.e., natural death, does not mutilate it. And if you wish [to] say that the fact that the sword is worse than death is learned from a verse: “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His pious ones” [Ps. 116:15].

Famine is worse than the sword. If you wish, say that this is derived by logical reasoning: This one who dies of famine suffers greatly before departing from this world, but that one who dies by the sword does not suffer. If you wish, say instead that the fact that famine is worse than the sword is learned from a verse: “More fortunate were the victims of the sword than the victims of famine” [Lam. 4:9]. And captivity is worse than all of them, as it includes all of them, i.e., famine, the sword, and death.

Our sages compare the fate of a hostage to death, murder, and famine, writing that it is worse than each of them *and* like all of them combined. The context of the verses they cite from Jeremiah is a particularly dark prophecy of God’s punishing of the Jewish people, describing the destruction of Jerusalem, and, in particular, the pain of mothers, in great detail:

“I will make their widows more numerous than the sand of the sea. At midday, I will bring a destroyer against the mothers of their young men; suddenly, I will bring down on them anguish and terror. The mother of seven will grow faint and breathe her last. Her sun will set while it is still day; she will be disgraced and humiliated. I will put the survivors to the sword before their enemies,” declares the Lord. (Jer. 15:8-9)

Jeremiah’s prophecy expresses extreme pain and suffering, and our sages view captivity through this lens. In a recent article in *Commentary*, several Jewish studies scholars note that Jewish (as well as Muslim and Christian) ethical traditions around hostage release differ from Roman tradition:

In stark contrast to the Roman conception, whereby the captive automatically lost his status as a free citizen when taken into custody beyond the limits of the State, Judaism developed collective responsibility for captives, which has survived the captivity of Jewish communities themselves.

Further, the evolution of practices of redeeming captives in the first millennium of the

Common Era attests to the emergence of shared self-definitions among all three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In all three, a community of believers was conceived as a unified religious society, one which was to satisfy its members' need for strong mutual bonds. When we examine how captives were redeemed, we discover a deep connection between the faith of individual believers and their religious social order as a whole. The individual captive remains a part of the body politic of believers, even when his or her own body has been temporarily severed from them. The act of their redemption bears witness to the individual's fundamental identity with the group and, at the same time, testifies to the group's identity in opposition to its enemies.<sup>[1]</sup>

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The fact that captives suffer does not ensure that their societies will do everything possible to release them. The article I just cited describes the different ways various societies historically regarded their obligations toward captives, indicating that prioritizing captive release is a communal ethical choice. In the *Mishneh Torah* (Laws and Gifts for the Poor 8:10), Maimonides writes:

The redemption of captives held for ransom takes precedence over sustaining and clothing the poor. You do not find a mitzvah greater than the redemption of captives, for captivity is in the same category as famine, drought, or exposure, and one stands in danger to one's life. Someone who shies away from redeeming him violates the following Torah prohibitions: (1) Do not harden your heart from helping the poor [Deut. 15:7]; (2) Do not close your hand [ibid.]; (3) Do not stand by when someone's life is in danger [Lev. 19:16]; (4) Do not subjugate him with hard work [Lev. 25:53]. He also violates the positive mitzvot of: (1) You shall surely open your hand to him [Deut. 15:8]; (2) Allow your brother to live with you [Lev. 25:36]; (3) Love your fellowman as yourself [Lev. 19:18].

In explaining ransom, Maimonides focuses on aspects of communal responsibility. By understanding this mitzvah relative to the laws of charity and by citing many examples of violations and positive commandments, he indicates that redeeming captives is a matter of Jewish

communal responsibility. Concern for the captive becomes a quintessential expression of care for the other within our community. This is amplified further by Beit Yosef in the *Shulchan Arukh*: “Every moment that one unnecessarily delays the ransoming of a captive, it is as if he were to shed blood.” (Yoreh Deah, 252:2)

Rabbi Yosef Karo creates a link here both to the communal understanding articulated by Maimonides and to the Talmud’s connection between captivity and death, viewing the failure to ransom a captive as equivalent to murder, no less.

Beyond being a “great mitzvah,” we must understand redeeming captives as an organizing principle of articulating the boundaries of our community. Captives, even when taken from within our community and dragged beyond our borders, are still part of our people. They become signifiers of communal responsibility, of what the idea of peoplehood means in practice.

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In discussions of the cost of hostage release in our time, we often hear of the need to balance between the values of solidarity and security. Here, “solidarity” refers to caring for those who are held in captivity, while “security” expresses the fear that exchanging hostages for prisoners will ultimately endanger the entire community. In this articulation, the “great mitzvah” of hostage release is perhaps lesser than a greater mitzvah, namely, the community’s security.

The claim that these values stand in conflict emerges from a Mishnah in tractate Gittin: “The captives are not redeemed for more than their worth, for the sake of the betterment of the world [*tikkun olam*]; and one may not aid the captives to escape, for the sake of the betterment of the world.” (4:6)

This passage includes two ambiguous terms, which have given rise to many rabbinic discussions from Talmudic times until now. The first is the word “worth,” *yoter al kedai dameihem*, and the second is the phrase “betterment of the world,” *tikkun olam*.

In commenting about the “worth” of the captive, the medieval Tosafot write, “When there is fear of loss of life, we ransom them for more than they are worth” (bGittin 58), making a captive’s worth an issue of context. If the individual held in captivity is not in a life-threatening situation, the price we are willing to pay for them might be lower than if there are imminent threats to their life. That said, other Rishonim (in some interpretations), such as Nachmanides, challenged the Tosafot’s position. He argued that since every situation of captivity entails some measure of threat to life, it is illogical to read the Mishnah as focused only on non-life-threatening situations.

Debate about the phrase *tikkun olam*, betterment of the world, begins in the Talmud:

A dilemma was raised before the Sages: Concerning this expression, for the betterment of



the world, is it due to the financial pressure of the community? Is the concern that the price increase will lead to the community assuming financial pressures it cannot manage? Or perhaps it is because the result of this will be that they will not seize and bring additional captives, as they will see that it is not worthwhile for them to take Jews captive? (bGittin 45a)

The Talmud gives no answer, leaving the phrase ambiguous.

The meaning of “worth” and of *tikkun olam* becomes even more complicated in modern-day Israel. Do we regard captured soldiers the same way we regard captured civilians? Are terrorists who kidnap equivalent to the pre-modern captors our sages were familiar with? Are the rules in times of peace different from the rules in times of war?

These issues also raise larger questions about the “Jewishness” of the State of Israel. Must the Jewish State behave according to Jewish tradition in this matter, or should it prioritize other concerns and views?

Israel has faced these questions before, and over the years, different rabbinic authorities have taken different positions. For example, Rabbi Zalman Melamed in *Pninei Halacha* (1998-2002) writes the following:

We learned [from experience] that we should never succumb to the financial blackmail of captors, except when lives are on the line, in which case there are different opinions. This is only in the case of criminal captors, who only want to make money. But when the context is ongoing war between us and terrorists, we can never surrender to their blackmail. For if we surrender, our enemies will see it as a sign of weakness, their morale will heighten, and they will continue to harm us. We also know that after these “successes,” more terrorists emerge. They will also realize that they can be captured [by Israel] and then released in prisoner exchanges. Furthermore, they will continue harming us. Therefore, despite the tragedy, we cannot surrender to blackmail and cannot pay more of what is acceptable, which is one life for one life.

In Melamed’s view, in a perpetual war, one always needs to project strength first, and the mitzvah of *pidyon shvuyim* plays a secondary role to what he views as security. He does concede elsewhere that in the case of a long-term peace agreement, the rules change and all prisoners can be released in exchange for hostages:

We are in a time of complex and prolonged war with the Palestinian nation, and from them come groups of fighters who viciously attack the Jewish nation living in its land, and the context is national; as long as we don't find a solution, this war will continue and get worse...

And if we are already discussing the idea that Rabbi Goren writes, that a negotiation deal will strengthen the numbers of terrorists because we are releasing trained terrorists, etc. This is true, but let us ask, did those leaders who negotiated the deal, such as the minister of defense, not know this? But instead, there was another point that countered this: the soldiers' morale. When a soldier knows that if he falls captive, the whole State of Israel will stand behind him to redeem him, he will fight fearlessly, but if he thinks that he won't be ransomed for more than he is worth, he will likely say, I would rather fall back than be taken captive. And who knows how to assess the more significant threat: strengthening the terrorists by releasing their friends, or increasing soldiers' morale for future wars if they will G-d forbid occur?

We learn from both Halevy and Goren (at least as he is presented by Halevy in this text) that context remains central to our understanding of hostage exchange today. It is not merely a case of "solidarity vs. security" but a question of what "security" means. For Halevy, caring for soldiers is a security issue. Knowing that the State will have your back is central to a functioning society, and fits into the same logic as our tradition. This is all the more true in the case of hundreds of civilians, including whole families, who are being held captive.

Halevy suggests as well that understanding the captor's motivation is critical. In the Israeli case, he suggests that as long as there isn't peace, we must understand that motivations for kidnapping are ever-present, and we should not fear that ransoming will convince the captors to kidnap again, as they will continue regardless.

In the case of modern Israel, this sadly seems to be the reality. Many who are opposed to ransoming captives point to the fact that one of the architects of the October 7 attack was released from an Israeli jail as part of the hostage exchange for the soldier Gilad Shalit in 2011. But it is also worth remembering that more recently, when Israel has refused to release prisoners—as in the cases of Avera Mangisto, who was taken in 2014, and the bodies of fallen soldiers Oron Shaul and Hadar Goldin— Hamas has not stopped kidnapping. This suggests that Halevy is correct: Israeli action has little effect on Hamas's interest in kidnapping Israelis.

The context is complicated and ever-changing, and one can get lost in the different arguments about the meaning of security and the contributions of various sages. Further, the interpretation of these texts is always affected by the interpreter's political worldview. For example, Finance Minister Betzalel Smotrich suggested that the hostage negotiations should be taken off the table, saying "we should have been the one refusing to conduct negotiations and speaking only in fire and brimstone ... that's the only way to bring all the hostages back and restore security for the State of Israel."

In 1976, Palestinian terrorists hijacked a plane full of Israelis and diverted it to Entebbe. As the government deliberated the right course of action, Rav Ovadia Yosef, then Chief Sephardic

Rabbi of Israel, wrote a lengthy responsum covering various aspects of the operation. A substantial part of Rav Ovadia's *psak* deals with military operations, but he includes this point, which I find a helpful framing for thinking about this issue today:

It seems that most of the *poskim* understand that when there is [life-threatening] danger, we ransom prisoners for more than they are worth, and we didn't find any of the great *poskim* saying the contrary, so it seems that by law, we should behave this way. In this specific case, even for those who use the reasoning of not ransoming for more than their worth for fear of more captives in the future, when there is an **immediate and real threat of [the captive's] death, we do not use this rationale**. And also here, where they [terrorists] do everything they can to kidnap and kill and murder in order to terrorize our everyday lives in Israel ... the law stands. (Emphasis added.)

Even as he recognizes that the context is complicated, and that security questions are continually shifting and being debated, Rav Ovadia returns to communal responsibility. He insists that if hostage release remains contingent on other concerns, it risks making the law irrelevant.

Rav Ovadia reminds us that most of us are not actually strategists, and we don't understand the military and geopolitical implications of hostage release. Pretending that we are can lead us to forget the rules and their ethical importance. Ransoming hostages is at the core of our tradition. The call for care and for doing everything possible, including ransom, is crucial for those of us thinking about community from any perspective. Pitting solidarity against security from each other is a false dichotomy that can lead us to lose track of our communal responsibilities. The 1976 event ultimately ended with a successful military raid.

Every day here counts. I pray that by the time this piece is published, all of our hostages will be safely at home with their families. But until then, our role is to make their names heard in our communities as loudly as possible, and to continue to push for their release in any way we can. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "And there is hope for your future, declared the Lord, that your children should return to their borders." (31:17)

## Endnotes

[1] Avital Davidovich-Eshed et al, "The Hostages and Why We Must Redeem Them: A History," *Commentary*, October 20, 2023.

# Watching War: This Moment in the History of Israel-Diaspora Relations

**Geoffrey Levin**

**Geoffrey Levin** is Assistant Professor of Middle Eastern and Jewish Studies at Emory University and author of *Our Palestine Question: Israel and American Jewish Dissent, 1948-1978*.

Alienation. Sadness. Confusion. Anxiety. Guilt. Fear. Anger.

These are but a small sampling of the feelings that people around me are experiencing right now. Like many Jews today, I sense these emotions in the expressions of friends and family, but as a Middle Eastern and Jewish studies professor, I see them even more powerfully on the faces of my Jewish students.

Emotions can be transformative. I can tell that these weeks since October 7 will change their lives. They are rethinking their identities, recalibrating their politics, and shifting their relationship with Jewish traditions and Jewish communities. Some of these changes will last for the rest of their lives. Other changes will not.

As a historian viewing this moment in a broader American Jewish historical context, I see this as a transformative period for a generation, one that will likely leave younger Jews more closely tied to Israel but also more internally conflicted about it. One of the factors that makes this transformation so likely is just how much more contact young American Jews have with both Israelis and Palestinians than in the past.

Preexisting frameworks can help us explain these dynamics. In a 2021 *Sources* article titled “[Liberal Zionism and the Troubled Committed](#),” Donniel Hartman outlined four Jewish perspectives on Israel, categories that I am finding useful in explaining how American Jews felt on October 6, how they feel now, and how I expect many will be feeling in the months to come.

Of the four categories, Hartman considers himself one of the “troubled committed”—a Jew who is “unconditionally committed to Israel’s survival” while also being “troubled” by the fact that his “commitment to human rights and equality, to treating all people as created in the image of God, is inconsistently applied” in the West Bank and Gaza.

Hartman contrasts this position with that of the “untroubled committed”—Zionists who are unbothered by systemic inequalities in lands controlled by Israel—as well as with that of the “untroubled uncommitted,” Jews uninterested in Israel, and that of the growing “troubled uncommitted.” This “troubled uncommitted” category, which includes anti-Zionists, have, in Hartman’s words, “entered the mainstream of Jewish and North American life and discourse. Recent surveys indicate that close to a third of American Jews believe that it is legitimate to associate Israel’s policies with apartheid.”

Anecdotally, the horrors of October 7 set off a surge of commitment among a wide swath of Jews, including most of those who identify as Zionist and some of those who do not. For many American Jews, especially young Jews, the message of October 7 and global reactions to it is that they are undeniably part of a broader Jewish “we”—on the good days and especially on the bad—and that “we” can only rely on fellow Jews to understand and support “us.” This challenging message is instilling or reinforcing in many Jews a sense of solidarity that will endure.

This solidarity has led many Jews to support Israel’s war against Hamas in Gaza. However, the war’s mounting civilian death toll, and the extended occupation of Gaza likely to follow it, is and will be morally troubling for many American Jews. Jews who Hartman would characterize as “troubled uncommitted” are already mobilizing in unprecedented numbers under the auspices of Jewish Voice for Peace and IfNotNow to call for an immediate ceasefire. As the war goes on, as Palestinian deaths continue to rise, as an ethically challenging post-war reality takes shape, and as calls for Palestinian equality continue to be unaddressed in the post-Netanyahu era, I predict that American Jews will grow more troubled with Israeli policies than ever before. This will lead to an even more intense version of the October 6 American Jewish landscape—a liberal American Jewish majority that feels even more that its fate is intensely connected to the Jewish state, but that is even more deeply disturbed by systemic inequalities in Israel/Palestine.

The unique horrors of this war only partially account for the intensity of American Jewish reactions. While the verb “distancing” has been used to describe trends in Israel-Diaspora relations, I think that “proximity” is the word and concept most crucial for understanding why this moment is different from any other for American Jews, and why this war will lead American Jews to feel both more connected and more troubled. For just as American Jews have more intimate direct exposure to Israeli people and culture than ever before, they also have more contact with Palestinians than ever before. Unless Israeli and Palestinian leaders both make unexpected moves in the direction of peace, equality, and humanization, there is a very fraught and uncomfortable future ahead for American Jewish identity.

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## American Jews and Israelis Today: Proximity, Not Distance

It has been a challenging time for many American Jewish students on many levels, as they witness the horror of mass death in the Middle East, feel pained when the suffering of fellow Jews is ignored or trivialized, and deal directly with implicit and explicit forms of harassment.

But I think the form of pain least understood by non-Jews right now is that of unacknowledged personal grief. Israeli victims are not an abstraction for so many young American Jews today, and it is fairly common for students to know people directly affected by the brutal Hamas massacre and the war. Many, if not most, Jewish students have been to Israel or have met Israelis here, whether they be Israeli Americans, extended family, or *shlichim* working at their summer camps or Hillel.

These sorts of connections between American Jews and Israelis explains a lot about the nature of American Jewish pain right now and about the inability of so many of our non-Jewish friends to understand what we are going through. Indifference—and even more so, hostility—toward the Jewish pain of October 7 is not just an abstract injustice for many Jews. Rather, it is a negation of our personal mourning. Rising antisemitism pours salt into our collective wound. We cannot expect everyone to understand the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but many Jews did hope to receive more basic human compassion during a moment of personal and communal mourning. Jews everywhere with such expectations have been disappointed. Idealistic young college students, surrounded constantly by peers and an unrelenting atmosphere of political discourse, activism, and debate, have been struck by these feelings even more than most.

If the ubiquity of personal proximity to Israel helps to explain the nature of American Jewish pain right now, it is also key to explaining how this moment differs from all past Middle East wars for American Jews. Efforts to send American Jews to Israel—most notably Birthright-Taglit, among many other subsidized trips—mean that young American Jews today are far, far more likely to have experienced Israel firsthand than their parents or grandparents were at the outset

of the wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, or even 1982 and the two Intifadas. Technology has also bridged the distance between American Jews and Israelis. This includes the growing availability of Israeli news in English, including sources like the Zionist centrist *Times of Israel* and the center-right *Jerusalem Post*, as well as *Haaretz English*, *+972 Magazine*, and other publications on the left.

The argument that young American Jews are “distancing” from Israel draws from surveys that show, among other things, declining support for Israeli policies amidst the country’s long rightward drift. But Israelis have been humanized to American Jews, no less and in some ways far more intimately than in the glory days of Israel-Diaspora ties right after 1967. Jews of all political stripes are only a degree, or two or three, away from Israeli victims of this war, and many young American Jews are becoming embittered and alienated by their unacknowledged grief. The effects of this pain will last.

## Echoes from the Past

One reason I am so confident of the lasting impact of these feelings is not just because of what I see in the classroom and during office hours. It is from what I see in my research.

Research for my forthcoming book, *Our Palestine Question: Israel and American Jewish Dissent, 1948-1978*, involved taking a deep dive into archival material from the 1940s through the 1970s. This included Jewish organizations’ public material, but also more intimate sources: American Jews’ memoirs, letters to family members, diaries, internal organizational correspondence, interviews, and oral history transcripts. I was able to see trends in the evolution of Jewish politics, and I developed a sense of which events left a deep impact on individuals and organizations and which did not. The emotions and rhetoric of the past echo today, and, to some degree, sources from the past foreshadow the terrible crises of the present.

One comparison to the present crisis facing American Jews is a series of debates that erupted in the late 1960s and continued into the 1970s. For American Jews, the Six Day War of 1967 and the threatening mobilization of Egyptian troops leading up to it elicited a rollercoaster of emotions as Israel defeated the Arab states surrounding it in less than a week. At that moment, with Israel’s existence threatened, many American Jews found themselves realizing for the first time how much the Jewish state meant to them, and they united to mobilize in support, much the way many Jews felt and responded after October 7. Many decades later, older American Jews still harken back to feelings of attachment that were first awakened in 1967. The brevity of the Six Day War and the relative ease with which Israel won meant that there was little time for more complicated feelings or resentments to arise.

Yet the positive feelings surrounding Israel’s 1967 victory were soon interrupted and for some,

overtaken by another set of relevant emotions.

During the summer of 1967, an article in a little-known publication called *The SNCC Newsletter* shocked American Jews when it became one of the first outlets affiliated with the New Left to publicly embrace the Palestinian cause.

SNCC, known originally as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, emerged in the early 1960s as a significant force in the civil rights movement. With politics resembling those of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SNCC organized student sit-ins and worked to mobilize Black voters in the South. By the mid-1960s, however, SNCC was moving in radical new directions, rejecting white participation, and renaming itself the Student *National* Coordinating Committee as it renounced nonviolence. SNCC's leaders increasingly identified their struggle with those of subjugated "Third World" peoples overseas. This involved embracing a Black internationalist vision that identified with the Arab world and Islam, particularly as more African Americans embraced Islam, and Afro-Arab cooperation within the global Non-Aligned Movement increased.

In this context, SNCC member Ethel Minor wrote "Third World Roundup – The Palestine Problem: Test Your Knowledge" in the June-July 1967 issue of *The SNCC Newsletter*. Her article listed 32 "facts" about Israel. Some of these were standard pro-Palestine talking points grounded in reality. Other "facts," however, drew from longtime antisemitic conspiracy theories and/or baselessly framed Zionist Jews as the scourge of Black peoples everywhere.

The ensuing controversy foreshadowed countless more in the years to come. Mainstream Jewish organizations condemned SNCC. The many young American Jews who had volunteered within the civil rights movement felt alienated and resentful. Many Jews once involved with SNCC voiced their inability to support it any longer, with the most notable being actor and folksinger Theodore Bickel, who penned an open "Farewell to SNCC" letter in August 1973.

Many other left-wing activist groups, both Black and white majority, also vocalized their support for the Palestinians after the 1967 war. These years also saw rising attacks against Israelis by the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) different factions and offshoots, leading American Jews to feel exasperated by American leftists' unwillingness to condemn terrorism targeting civilians. Upset and angry, many Jews left such organizations in the late 1960s, though a not-insignificant number of Jews remained in radical groups and aligned themselves with the Palestinian cause.

Of those who abandoned the New Left, many formed radical Zionist organizations aiming to synthesize their leftist and Zionist commitments. Many of these groups and organizations were local, like the New York-based Jewish Liberation Project, Boston-area New Zionists, the Jewish Liberation Coalition of Providence, and others, but together they formed a loose umbrella group called the Radical Zionist Alliance that issued statements in the early 1970s.



Other Jews who abandoned the New Left during this period went on to become associated with what is now known as neoconservatism, stemming in part from the feeling that being on the political left was incompatible with Zionism. The Jews who remained allied with increasingly pro-Palestine left-wing circles, such as those who founded the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), agreed with those budding neoconservatives that their radical commitments were incompatible with Zionism, but they instead left their Zionism behind, if they had any such feelings or commitments in the first place.

Many of the emotions that these Jews reported during the late 1960s and 1970s mirror those I see today. Having observed the trajectories of Jewish individuals who held this wide range of responses to 1967 and afterward, it is clear to me that the emotions of that moment have been defining for many people's politics. This includes some who felt such a strong burst of commitment that they ultimately made *aliyah* to Israel, and some on the other end who have had strained ties with the mainstream Jewish community ever since.

Of course, because the horrors of October 7, as well as the worldwide embrace of the Palestinian cause and the spike in antisemitism we are seeing in 2023, are all much greater than in 1967, emotions are even more intense. Among many Jews, feelings of commitment to Jewish statehood and/or their closeness to other Jews have grown and will stay that way. It is hard to forget callous acts of antisemitism against oneself and one's community. Scars from the vandalism of synagogues are more challenging to cover up than the spray paint itself. A student of mine who endured violent antisemitic yelling in his hometown on October 8 will never forget it. He and others will also never forget who stood with them afterward, and who did not.

## **Palestine Solidarity and the Future of American Jewish Community**

An important aspect of Donniel Hartman's 2021 article was his acknowledgment of the growing "troubled uncommitted" segment of American Jewry, which includes self-identified anti-Zionists and many of those who support the association of Israeli policies with apartheid. While it is true that this demographic is growing, it is not without precedent, and perhaps in determining how to respond to this trend, it would be helpful for American Jewish leaders to consider how non-Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews were treated in the past.

The fact is, even though a majority of American Jews have always supported Israel, ever since the Jewish state was created, there have been American Jews deeply unsettled by Israel's policies toward the Palestinians and its leaders' overall attitude toward Arabs. In Israel's early decades, when many fewer Americans made it to Israel, the people most troubled by Israeli policies were often those exposed to both Israeli Jewish and Arab voices because they spent a significant amount of time in the region. This included the founders and leaders of the first national Jewish organization to support what we now call the two-state solution, Breira, whom we might also

describe as the first highly visible American Jewish group to fit into what Hartman would call the “troubled committed” category. Despite Breira leaders’ attachment to Israel and their commitment to the Jewish community, the organization dissolved in 1977, only four years after its founding, amidst harsh critiques from many in the organized American Jewish establishment. Some of Breira’s leaders went on to play highly active roles in mainstream American Jewish life; others, who started off as enthusiastic young people committed to Jewish community, ended up feeling alienated and disenfranchised for many decades.

In reflecting on past and present, here too, proximity explains the difference. Today, just as far more American Jews have seen Israel, so, too, have many more encountered Palestinians and heard about their experiences—whether through their travels to the Middle East, various media channels, or conversations with classmates. I have students with Palestinian friends who have lost dozens of relatives to Israeli bombs in Gaza. How can anyone expect them not to be upset about that? Is it a surprise that many Jews are mobilizing to end this war immediately, given that horror? This is a deeply depressing situation on so many levels, and while it is easy to divide people into categories, remember that some Jewish students right now are simultaneously suffering from antisemitic harassment while also trying to make sense of mass Palestinian deaths, either privately or through public activism.

It should not be controversial to say that there is a disconnect between the liberalism that many American Jews embrace as a minority in our democracy, and the way Zionism has been implemented in Israel, especially in terms of Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians. As much as I have been listening to my students discuss the pain of rising antisemitism, I have also heard many young Jews grappling with the troubling realities of Israeli policies’ often brutal impact on Palestinians. I urge American rabbis and other Jewish community leaders to listen seriously to these voices if they care about the future of the Jewish diaspora, not to simply condemn and excommunicate Jews who are trying to express their pain over the deeply troubling things that Palestinians experience both in their daily lives and during this war.

Many American Jews featured in my book ended up feeling alienated and disenchanted with Jewish communal life because of the harshness of their community’s response to even mild advocacy for Palestinian wellbeing. Their stories should be a cautionary tale for anyone who envisions a big-tent American Jewish community. Jewish leaders worldwide must be mindful of the reality of diverse and polarized opinions within our community. If one believes in the idea of Jewish peoplehood and frames oneself as a leader of Jews, the feeling, opinions, and emotional wellbeing of pro-Palestine Jews should matter, too.

Historically, many Israeli officials actively worked to undermine American Jewish engagement with Palestinian rights. However, David Ben-Gurion, unpredictable figure that he was, had a particularly interesting perspective on the issue. In 1957, he spent hours discussing Israel and

Jewish politics with Lessing Rosenwald, chairman of the board of America's most outspoken anti-Zionist Jewish organization at the time, the American Council for Judaism. That same year, Ben-Gurion also met with leaders of the then non-Zionist American Jewish Committee who urged the Prime Minister to lessen the onerous restrictions faced by Israeli citizens of Palestinian Arab background.

While Ben-Gurion defended his policies, he also made it clear that Diaspora Jews were free to criticize his stance. "As a Jew, you have a right!" he declared, according to minutes of the meeting in Israeli archives.

Ben-Gurion is, for many reasons, not someone either Palestinians or anti-Zionist Jews view positively. But for Zionists today, his words might hold a lesson about an older, more open Zionist attitude toward Diasporic Jewish expression, even on sensitive issues such as security, Palestinian rights, and anti-Zionism. Jewish leaders might look toward them as they prepare for a community more "committed" and more "troubled."<sup>[1]</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>[1]</sup> Much of the historical information within this article comes from chapters 3, 4, and 6 of Geoffrey Levin, *Our Palestine Question: Israel and American Jewish Dissent, 1948-1978* (Yale University Press, 2023) and the sources cited there. This article also draws from recent books by Pamela Pennock and Michael Fischbach.

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# A Shelter for Your Sorrows: Multifaith Chaplaincy in a Time of War

**Katja Vehlow**

**Katja Vehlow** is a rabbi and previously taught Religious and Jewish studies at the University of South Carolina, Columbia. She is currently training as a hospital chaplain at Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn.

The images and stories of that Shabbat in early October shook me. Of course, I know that such attacks occur; only a month earlier, Azerbaijan drove some 100,000 Armenians from Nagorno Karabakh in less than a week, with 200 dead and perhaps 400 injured, while most of the world watched and shrugged. And yet—large-scale killing of Jews, of my own people, was supposed to be a thing of the past. This was a jarring day, one that shattered the trust Israelis had set in their state and their security system, and one that, for many, evoked memories of the Shoah. In far-away New York City, I joined my Israeli friends in grief and shock.

Perhaps because I am training to be a chaplain, and my chaplaincy persona is still in formation, the time we live in right now feels pivotal. A seismic shift is occurring, and the outcome is unclear. I decided early on that I wanted to learn to harvest my sense of profound disorientation. I wanted to tap into my emotions to better align with seekers of care so that I might understand their experiences of suffering, uncertainty, and loss in a deeper sense. I also wanted to understand what this massacre, and the ensuing war between Israel and Hamas, means for my understanding of and my place in multifaith work.

Chaplains provide spiritual and emotional support to individuals or groups, often during crises such as illness, death, or other traumatic events, but few of us are trained therapists. A chaplain may assist someone to identify sources of hope and strength or may offer support when difficult ethical questions arise. In the United States, chaplains can be found in many different settings: hospitals, universities, nursing homes, the military, prisons, and even some workplaces.

Chaplaincy is quintessentially multifaith work; chaplains quite often work with people from many traditions both as seekers of care and as colleagues. A chaplain may provide tradition-specific care such as blessings or rituals, but minority chaplains in particular routinely serve people who come from other or no explicit faith traditions. While doing so, chaplains work from within their own tradition. This means that Jewish chaplains often turn to the spiritual tools of the Jewish tradition to make a difference in the lives of people who are not Jewish. My approach to chaplaincy may be primarily anchored in Jewish texts, ideas, and songs, but this perspective is not usually expressed in my day-to-day encounters with patients. And so, I asked myself after October 7, how can Jewish texts help us to incorporate an experience of genocide, of violence, and great uncertainty into our work as caregivers?

In Parashat Vayera, Genesis 18:1, we read that God appears to Abraham as he is sitting by the terebinth of Mamre. This unusual verse marks a pause between the story of the circumcision of Abraham and his household and the visit of the three angels who will foretell the birth of Isaac. Jewish tradition reads this as a sick visit, a connection not made by the Bible itself.<sup>[1]</sup> The verse is unusual because it does not continue with a speech act, as for example in Genesis 12:7 or 17:12 where “God appeared to Abram and *said...*” Instead, we read that *vayera elav Adonai*, “it appeared to him God.” And then, nothing. The Torah does not tell us what they are talking about and remains vague. Perhaps, as my teacher Rabbi Benzion Leser pointed out, God visits Abraham, and no words are exchanged as he sits with him in his pain. What matters is the silence. This visit, traditionally seen as an archetype of *bikkur cholim*, of visiting the sick, models a powerful presence when we visit someone in distress. Such an attentive listening silence can signal: I am here with you. I have no words for what you are going through. In fact, I may not understand what you are experiencing right now but I am here. Sometimes, just sitting in that person’s pain is a powerful way to support them. True presence, a hallmark of chaplaincy, is active and nurturing. Presence and simply holding space is invaluable when working with those in pain.

It is easy to dismiss silence. Isn’t it cheap to say nothing? What does it mean when this silence feels hostile and isolating? Or, perhaps worse, when people we consider friends dismiss our experience as marginal by refusing to speak? And indeed, many found the silence of some of their friends and colleagues right after the October 7 massacres, and now during the war, deafening. They feel abandoned. But there are different kinds of silence: there is the silence born of rejection, or of apathy, when another person cannot be bothered to speak, and the silence that is an expression of speechlessness because we may lack words or be afraid to hurt someone. A silence of distance or disengagement, of helplessness or caution is different from the silence we encounter when God visits Abraham in Vayera, from an intentional presence that joins someone who is in great distress.

In the story above, God listens, and in this listening offers a model to chaplains. Offering a listening heart to another person is one of the central things chaplains do. Listening is also at the

heart of what is arguably the Jewish declaration of identity, the *Shema*, the assurance that there is but one God: “Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One” (Deut. 6:4-9) followed by “It shall come to pass if you surely listen to My commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve God with all your heart and all your soul.” (Deut. 11:13) For observant Jews, these words are the sounds of life: the *Shema* is recited twice daily during prayer and at bedtime, and also on Shabbat and at Neilah, the closing prayer of Yom Kippur. Its words are softly whispered into a newborn’s ears and recited as the deathbed *vidui*, the last penitential prayer before death. The opening word *shema* has so many meanings: to hear, to listen, to understand, to respond, to pay attention. The connotation is that the God of the Hebrew Bible often communicates in sounds rather than images, and again and again tells the Israelites to heed God’s words. Rabbi David Cohen (1887-1972), also known as the “Great Hearer” and as Rav Kook’s main student, notes that in the Babylonian Talmud, too, understanding was connected to hearing, not seeing. *Ta shema*, we read, “come and hear.” Or *shema mina*, “hear from this.” Listening matters.

Almost a century ago, Anton Boisen (1867-1965) founded what is now known as Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), to date the gold standard for chaplaincy training in the US. He centered the intensive study of the human experience or, in his words, “the living human document” as the core task of CPE. Boisen called on chaplains to start with the suffering person and only then to turn to books. Texts in the widest sense could be helpful but they were not more important than the person in front of a chaplain. Guided by his own experiences with mental illness, combined with a focus on liberal Protestant theology and a trust in science, Boisen thought that humans, while flawed creatures, could resolve their inner conflicts through the ultimate unification with the divine.<sup>[2]</sup> While our understanding of human nature has changed considerably over the decades, the “living human document” remains the essence of CPE programs, its focus now broadened to the “living human web,” an approach that takes into consideration the wider context in which humans exist, with a strong call for social justice.<sup>[3]</sup> Both approaches share a common aim: to extend radical empathy for the individual or the wider context in order to respond to people in need.

Chaplains encounter people at a time of great vulnerability. In order to help support somebody else who is in pain, we look towards our own vulnerability. In the last month, I found myself reaching deep into myself to hear not only the stories swirling around me, but to take note of what they evoked in me. At first, there were the stories from Israel: every day, every hour seemingly brought new voices telling new stories of brutality, resilience, and grief. Then came the war and the bombardment and with it the pictures and stories from Gaza and, a little closer, vigils, demonstrations supporting Palestine or Israel, or Hamas or the hostages in Gaza, random acts of hatred and violence, both real and perceived. Suddenly, many Jews and Palestinians lived in fear. Of course, colleagues and seekers of care were also impacted by this atmosphere. “Oh,” said the brother of a patient to me in the Emergency Room, a few days after October 7, sadly

and with sympathy, “are you Jewish? How can you even be here and minister to us this week?” I thought about his words as I sat on the subway on my commute home. While I had come to see how *he* was doing while his brother was undergoing an evaluation, he had taken a moment to consider who this chaplain was who was standing in front of him. How indeed could I serve my patients best, including those who may have roots in the region, on whatever side of the fence they may find themselves? I quickly learned that it can be difficult to mourn in a time of war, perhaps especially when this war is taking place at a great distance and is heavily contested. And yet, the events seem so close and raw, and new losses and horrors loom every day.

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CPE calls on chaplains to connect with others across difference, but if I do not listen to myself, can I truly hear others? Daniel Silberbusch, my CPE educator, reminded me of the wise words of Etty Hillesum (1914-1943), the Dutch Jewish author who wrote about her spiritual awakening amid the persecutions Amsterdam Jews suffered under German occupation, and who herself was murdered in Auschwitz. Imagining a conversation with her friend, the poet Ilse Blumenthal-Weiss, she astutely observes in her journal:

Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears his grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate. But if you do not clear a decent shelter for your sorrow, and instead reserve most of the space inside you for hatred and thoughts of revenge - from which new sorrows will be born for others - then sorrow will never cease in this world and will multiply.[4]

Hillesum tasks her reader, and perhaps herself, with setting out on a path of radical emotional honesty, a process that she feels was necessary for healing. Her powerful words call on me to let grief bubble up, and allow any connected feelings—even the ones I would rather ignore such as fury, shame, or numbness—without judging myself. Only when we can see these emotions in ourselves, when we allow ourselves to build our own shelters of sadness, can we stem the wave of mourning. This is an inner process, and chaplains learn to take the time to do this work so they do not bring these emotions to their patients. Hillesum also issues a stern warning to not hate

those who caused us grief because many of them, too, “sorrow at this time.” They, too, are human, with their own stories and their own sadness.

Chaplaincy is not so much an interfaith or interreligious project as a multifaith undertaking. Chaplains rarely talk about theories of interreligious encounters. But while many interfaith projects have paused or collapsed, chaplaincy continues because, I suspect, chaplains are united in their service to the very real suffering of people, regardless of who they are. This is true not only in American hospitals but also in Israel, where healthcare is one of the few fields open to Palestinians outside the confines of Palestinian society, and Palestinian Israeli citizens make up a considerable share of healthcare professionals. In 2021, 43% of new licenses went to Arab and Druze doctors, for example.<sup>[5]</sup> Their presence gives Palestinian Israeli patients a sense of cultural recognition along with a sense of safety. They are rarely thanked; when Israeli Palestinian healthcare workers leave the hospital, they are again read as Israeli Palestinians only. They may return to neighborhoods that are riddled by violence; more than 200 Palestinian Israelis have been murdered in their own communities this year alone.<sup>[6]</sup> And now, during the war, the place of Palestinian Israelis in Israeli society is becoming ever more precarious, their rights curtailed and threatened. Despite this, Palestinian Israeli healthcare workers continue to care for every human being, no matter their origin. Many are filling in for Jewish physicians called up to serve in the reserves. Israeli hospitals remain places where Jewish and Palestinian Israelis work to heal Jewish and Arab patients, sites of extraordinary cooperation and achievement for Arab professionals. Fahima Abbas, a researcher at Adva Center, an Israeli progressive think tank monitoring social and economic development, recently notes that this cooperation “is an important element of a democratic state.”<sup>[7]</sup> This acceptance of Israeli Palestinians in the medical field has limits; discussions of politics are usually off limits, for example. I would argue that it is the shared focus on the task at hand, on the suffering individual and the promise of healing, that has made Israeli hospitals into extraordinary places.

Chaplaincy embraces multifaith learning so chaplains can approach the people they work with in culturally and religiously appropriate ways. This also extends to an awareness of the presence of other traditions in our own traditions. By this I do not mean to read, say, Jesus or the Prophet Muhammad into the Hebrew Bible, although Christian and Islamic traditions have long done so. Rather, I mean an awareness that our holy texts and the ways in which they are read today are contested and enmeshed. For example, when I turn to the *akedah*, the story of the binding of Isaac (also known as the Test of Abraham), a seminal story of Jewish identity, I hold in the back of my mind that before the “your son, your only son,” as God calls Isaac, there was a first son, also beloved, who was expelled from the family. It is a hard story to read, and Jewish tradition asks whether Abraham and Sarah sinned when they sent Hagar and Ishmael away. The two versions of the story appear in Genesis 16 and 21. In Genesis 16, Sarah initiates Hagar’s marriage to Abraham, and, apparently unprepared for the psychological impact Hagar’s pregnancy and Ishmael’s birth would have on her, abuses Hagar until she takes off, taking her



child with her. For that reason, the thirteenth-century Spanish scholar Nachmanides comments that yes, “Sarah our mother sinned in this oppression, as did Abraham when he allowed her to do so.”<sup>[8]</sup> In Genesis 21, on the other hand, Hagar and Ishmael are sent away because of Ishmael’s behavior. The term describing his acts is subject to a wide range of interpretations that many commentators relate to a fight over inheritance of property as well as spiritual and political leadership over the Jewish people.

The great Israeli exegete and educator Nechama Leibowitz (1905-1997) notes that in Genesis 16, when Sarah was reacting to an uncomfortable domestic situation, the Torah judges her treatment of Hagar to be unjust. However, in chapter 21, Ishmael was seen as a threat to Isaac’s right of inheritance. In her eyes then, the Torah endorses strong action, including expulsion, to safeguard Jewish religious and national aspirations. Ishmael is sent away, and the sibling relationship between him and Isaac is severed, even if there seems to have been some sort of a reconciliation later on when they bury their father together. And yet, this rejected son receives his own blessing and becomes the patriarch of another religion. The three Abrahamic traditions, and especially Islam and Judaism are intertwined, with competing claims to truth, prophecy, and, now tinged with nationalism, land.

In chaplaincy, there are no bit players, as Silberbusch put it to me. Hillesum knows this when she explains that the seemingly interior process of allowing sorrow to surface is anything but private. As she writes in the quote above: “But if you do not clear a decent shelter for your sorrow... then sorrow will never cease in this world and will multiply.” Emotions, especially the difficult ones, want to be acknowledged internally so that on a communal level, too, healing can begin. The last month has been extraordinarily distressing for many people with the rising death toll in the war and the surge of antisemitism and Islamophobia, physical attacks, rhetoric endorsing the dehumanization of the other, and “leaflet wars” in urban neighborhoods. On college campuses, sites of great tensions, Jewish and Muslim chaplains, some of whom have become targets of aggression themselves, continue to care for angry and shaken students, offering space, and hope, and a listening presence.<sup>[9]</sup> Many people feel scared, angry, powerless, sad, isolated and unsafe, and it is not clear what all this means for the future of Israel/Palestine, the Jewish community and multifaith relations.

When I was a child, my German mother would tell me about the “*Quäkerspeisung*,” mythical parcels that would arrive from distant America as she grew up. Her eyes would shine as she recalled their captivating contents such as cheddar, chocolate, and chewing gum, rare delicacies in post-war Germany. Until I was 18 years old, I was convinced that the Religious Society of Friends who had sent them were a denomination numbering in the millions. Imagine my surprise when I learned differently. These parcels did not keep my mother alive, but they signaled to her that across the ocean, someone was seeing her as a little girl, a fellow human being. I do not know what the world will look like once the Gaza War ends, or what this war will

mean for Palestinians and Israelis, for Muslims and Jews, and all the others who are touched by this conflict, not least the hostages in Gaza. But I know that, like the Quakers sending these parcels after World War II, I hope I will continue to see all parties involved as human. At moments of acute suffering, we have a choice to make: will my own suffering lead me into isolation, or will it lead me into connection with others?

## Endnotes

[1] Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 86b.

[2] See, for example, Anton T. Boisen, *Religion in Crisis and Custom: A Sociological and Psychological Study* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945, 1955), 237.

[3] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “The Living Human Web: A Twenty-five Year Retrospective,” in *Pastoral Psychology* 67 (2018): 306-321.

[4] Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries 1941-1943 and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 97.

[5] Fahima Abbas, “In war as in peace, Palestinian Israeli physicians' contribution to Israel is essential – opinion,” *Jerusalem Post*, November 2, 2023.

[6] Adi Hashmonai, “25 Year-old Shot Dead in Northern Israeli Arab City, Police Arrest Suspect” *Haaretz* November 18, 2023.

[7] Fahima Abbas, “In war as in peace, Palestinian Israeli physicians' contribution to Israel is essential – opinion,” *Jerusalem Post*, November 2, 2023.

[8] Commentary to Genesis 16:6.

[9] Mariam Fam, “Jewish and Muslim Chaplains Navigate US Campus Tensions and Help Students Roiled by Israel-Hamas War,” *AP News*, October 28, 2023.

# Should Israel Attack First? Lessons from the Distinction between Commanded and Discretionary Wars in Jewish Law

**Shlomo Brody**

**Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Brody** is the executive director of Ematai and a post-doctoral fellow at Bar Ilan University Law School. This essay draws from his new book, *Ethics of our Fighters: A Jewish View on War and Morality* (Maggid Books).

Should Israel have attacked Hamas before October 7, 2023? In the aftermath of Hamas's slaughtering of 1200 and kidnapping of 240 more, we have to wonder what Israel might have done to prevent the Simchat Torah massacre. It's too early to know exactly what went wrong, and a full investigation will need to wait until after the war. But it seems obvious that many mistakes were made on the military, strategic, and political levels.

Amongst many painful questions, we'll need to ask whether Israel should have taken preventative measures to destroy the terror group. After all, Israel and Hamas fought in major battles in 2008-2009 ("Operation Cast Lead"), 2012 ("Pillar of Defense"), 2014 ("Protection Edge"), as well as in flareups of violence in 2010, 2018, and 2021. But in each of these moments, Israel consciously decided not to remove the terror group. Instead, it took a strategy of knocking Hamas back when it seemed to be getting overly belligerent. This restrained approach, known in Israel as "mowing the lawn," was taken partly because of the feared cost in lives from a greater war, but also for concern about potential diplomatic fallout and the question of who would replace Hamas in Gaza. More recently, in August 2022 ("Operation Breaking Dawn") and June 2023 ("Operation Shield and Arrow"), the IDF struck at Islamic Jihad forces in Gaza, but avoided confrontation with Hamas in fear of starting a larger war. Was that a mistake?

This dilemma of anticipatory strikes is not just a Monday morning quarterback question. Israel

needs a plan for combatting the stronger terrorist group, Hezbollah, in southern Lebanon, which has built up its arsenal over many years, and the even more lethal nuclear threat from Iran.

The notion of anticipatory wars against terrorist groups and rogue states makes people nervous, and with good reason. In 2002, not long after 9/11, the Bush administration announced its plan for fighting a “war on terror”: America would go on the offensive to prevent future assaults on her soil. In the words of the National Security Strategy paper, “As a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed.” Later, President Bush told reporter Tim Russert that war in Iraq was a “necessary war” to prevent weapons of mass destruction (WMD) from being used against the United States and its allies. Vice President Dick Cheney stated that when it comes to stopping low-probability but high-impact attacks, we need to act as if they were definitive threats. “If there’s a one percent chance that Pakistani scientists are helping Al Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response,” he said.

While supporters of the Iraq War billed it as a no-choice, “preemptive attack” against an imminent threat, critics denounced the Bush doctrine of stopping budding threats before they developed as immoral and dangerous, arguing that this offensive strategy would lead America into perilous battles against unfounded fears. American soldiers would be chasing ghosts. Cheney’s “one percent doctrine,” critics asserted, would lead the United States to torture detainees before trial, order drone attacks against suspicious but unproven enemy sites, and launch unnecessary wars.

In the end, no WMDs were found in Iraq. A trillion dollars was spent, hundreds of thousands were killed or wounded, and the region remains deeply unstable.

By definition, countries take preemptive attacks when they believe that an adversary is about to attack, and they reason that striking first will allow for a better outcome. The action Israel took in the face of imminent Egyptian hostilities in 1967, for example, was a classic preemptive attack, and it led to Israeli’s victory in the Six Day War. In contrast, the Iraq War was more of a “preventative” attack than a preemptive one. Preventative attacks are those launched in response to less immediate threats under the belief that it is better to fight an alleged adversary sooner than later, to strike victoriously and effectively before the window of opportunity closes. In Iraq, it turned out, America was preventing a threat that didn’t really exist or, at best, was too distant to justify warfare.

Critics of preventative wars should remember that the Iraq War and other parts of the “war on terror” might never have taken place, had the United States pursued Al Qaeda more aggressively before 9/11. The threat posed by Osama bin Laden was known beforehand. In August 1998, the Clinton administration launched missile strikes on Al Qaeda targets, hitting a suspected chemical weapons plant in Sudan and a training base in Afghanistan. A similar motivation inspired Israeli

targeted strikes on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 and the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007. Either of these attacks could have led to a major war but Israel thought (correctly, in those cases) that the risk was worth taking. Saddam Hussein and Bashar al-Assad never gained WMDs.

Jewish law provides a helpful framework for thinking about the dilemma of preventative and preemptive wars. As I'll show, Jewish military ethics does not distinguish between just and unjust wars as a binary between "no-choice" and "choice" wars. Instead, Jewish law describes a spectrum between "commanded wars" and "discretionary wars," recognizing a murky grey zone in which a country must make complex choices regarding self-defense.

## II.

Following the lead of the Talmudic sages, Maimonides divides Jewish warfare into two categories: *milhemet mitzvah*, usually translated as "commanded wars," and *milhemet reshut*, "discretionary wars." The former category includes the two wars against the ancient tribal nation of Amalek and the seven Canaanite nations mandated by God in the Torah. Yet, Maimonides asserts, because these nations no longer exist, these commands are irrelevant. The wars remaining in this category are those fought "to assist Israel with an enemy that attacks it" (Laws of Kings and Wars 5:1). Today, we'd call this a responsive war, or a war of self-defense, i.e., the enemy army has attacked and continues to threaten the country, demanding that Israel respond.

Maimonides, like the Sages, delineated these categories in his writings when the Jewish people had no state. Is there also a type of commanded war that sanctions fighting to retain control of the homeland? Nahmanides thought so. He includes another form of warfare in this category: a war of conquest, or, as he put it, "To take possession of the land that God, blessed and exalted be He, gave our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, and not leave it in the hands of other nations or in desolation." There's much speculation about whether Maimonides agreed that there is a commandment to fight for sovereignty over the Holy Land. Yet, once the Jewish people have control over the land, it's clear he holds that they should fight to protect its residents. The current war in Gaza falls into this sub-category of commanded wars. Israel was viciously attacked by an enemy that seeks to destroy the country and has shown that it will do anything it can to achieve that horrific goal. "Operation Swords of Iron" is meant to repel this assault, bring Israeli captives home, and restore security in Israeli towns throughout the country.

Maimonides contends that Israel should prioritize commanded wars before engaging in "discretionary wars," which he describes as wars "fought with other nations in order to expand the borders of Israel or magnify its greatness and reputation." In other words, a king must first address threats to his own territory and secure its borders. Then he may consider expanding beyond his borders and magnifying his imperial might. King David, arguably Israel's greatest military and political leader, enlarged his borders to places like Aram-Damascus (in contemporary Syria). Such imperialist wars were standard throughout history and seem to be

acknowledged in the Bible with equanimity.

Significantly, regarding commanded wars, the king could act on his own because the mission was seen as essential and time sensitive, particularly in the face of an attack. For similar reasons, all capable bodies were required to serve, to protect the greater collective. As the Sages put it, we conscript “even a groom from his room and a bride from her wedding canopy.” (bSota 44b)

Regarding discretionary wars, however, some soldiers could opt out, such as those who were recently married or settled in new homes. The fear was that such preoccupied soldiers would not be eager to fight, making them less attractive as warriors. A more significant exemption was given to those that claimed they were fearful to die in battle or too soft-hearted to kill. According to one Sage, this even included someone who is “a hero among heroes, powerful among the most powerful, but who is at the same time merciful—let him return [from the front lines].” (tSotah 7:14) The intent of the exemption was to weed out those who wouldn’t fight fearlessly; the effect of the law, however, was to allow a certain type of selective conscientious objection for fighters to opt out of unpopular discretionary wars. At the very least, the exemptions provide, in practice, an important check on monarchical abuse by publicly highlighting that these wars were nonessential.

Equally significantly, the king was required in a discretionary war to first consult with the Sanhedrin, a great assembly of 71 Sages. The king was not all-powerful. He needed permission to launch a discretionary war.

Whatever checks might have been in place, over time, *milhemet reshut* has earned a bad name, and for good reason. The rationale given by Maimonides for such a war could justify almost any war. If you allow for warfare to “expand the borders of Israel or magnify its greatness and reputation,” then it becomes hard to imagine, as ethicist Michael Walzer notes, what is left to prohibit. One might also translate *reshut* as “optional,” raising a broader question: given the vast bloodshed that comes in its wake, what kind of optional warfare could be morally acceptable? Surely, if a war is not needed for self-defense, in which case it would be obligatory, it should be entirely prohibited.

Rabbinic literature expresses some misgivings about King David’s conduct for the same reason. His wars were bloody affairs that cost many lives, including those of Israelites, and further distracted David from essential tasks like uprooting enemies closer to home. His military priorities were misplaced. Moreover, his excessive bloodshed is mentioned in the Bible as an explanation for why he was not worthy to build the Temple, whose rocks could not be hewn by metal—the material of warfare—let alone be assembled by a man who used his sword excessively.

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Indeed, during the war against the Ammonites, a war in which David achieved a “great name” and much fortune, he became embroiled in his infamous affair with a married woman, Bathsheba. He abused his power by sending her soldier husband, Uriah, on a quixotic mission so that he should die. “Place Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest,” he ordered his chief of staff, “then fall back so that he may be killed.” Uriah dies—along with other captains. David dismisses the losses by telling his chief general, “Do not be distressed about the matter. The sword always takes its toll.” (2 Sam 11:25) The sword does indeed take its toll, particularly when monarchs act out of nefarious motivations.

It’s precisely for this reason that our moral sentiments—and with them, Jewish law—have progressed to limit such violent imperialism. Some hold that even in Talmudic times, there were attempts at such limitations. According to Talmudist David Henshke, the concept of *milhemet reshut* only appears in rabbinic writings stemming from the school of Rabbi Akiva. In contrast, literature that emerged from the competing school of R. Yishmael never acknowledged the category of *milhemet reshut*, likely indicating discomfort with the concept.

The question of the permissibility of discretionary wars for Israel, however, remained theoretical for many centuries. By World War I, Jews had become warriors within the militaries of different empires: more than a million Jews served in the Allied forces in the Great War, as it was known then, with another 450,000 in the armies of the Central Powers.

One of the witnesses to this war was Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, then the chief rabbi of Jaffa. On the last days of July 1914, Kook traveled from Palestine to Frankfurt with the hope of rousing support for Zionism at a rabbinic conference. The war broke out on August 1. Kook managed to make it to St. Gallen, Switzerland, where he sheltered for the next eighteen months before traveling to London, where he served as a congregational rabbi until returning to Jerusalem in 1919. Stranded in Europe for the war’s duration, Kook had a front-row seat to the “global tempest,” as he called it, “and the horrors in its storm.”

While living in Switzerland, he wrote a treatise arguing that the requirement to get approval for a

Great Court (Sanhedrin) before engaging in expansionist warfare provided an important check-and-balance, moral and political, to the ancient Jewish monarchy. Kook contended that the court would only allow such offensive warfare, as a matter of exigency, if it was truly needed for the nation's physical and spiritual welfare. Most significantly, he concluded that such offensive warfare had not been permitted since the Great Court ceased to function many centuries ago.<sup>[1]</sup> The law, under this interpretation, could not apply in his own era.

This is a surprising conclusion since, in the same correspondence, Kook argues that the elected leaders of the people in a democratic system can fill the formal role of the defunct monarchy in representing the polity and fighting licit commanded wars. The notion that any representative leadership of the nation can fulfill the role of the king to launch a war is compelling and has medieval precedents.<sup>[2]</sup> That being the case, why can't a legislature or some other body do the same for the defunct Sanhedrin? The answer, it would seem, is that while other contemporary rabbis affirmed that national leaders could legally authorize a *milhemet reshut*, Kook was not interested in making it possible to launch expansionist wars. <sup>[3]</sup>

Indeed, several years earlier, Rabbi Kook had expressed hope in his diary that the world would someday reject expansionary battles and understand that "it was illegitimate to spill blood for the sake of achieving political goals."<sup>[4]</sup> Utilizing the same strategy, Rabbi Kook similarly asserted that there would come a time when we would no longer tolerate slavery, as accepted in the Bible and throughout much of history, or allow taking a captive enemy woman for a wife (*eshet yefat to'ar*), as permitted in Deuteronomy. Indeed, about this latter law, the Talmudic Sages had already asserted that the Bible was merely "accommodating the evil instinct." Some biblical practices, it seems, were not meant to last forever.

### III.

There's no doubt in my mind that Jewish law today rejects launching warfare for the sake of glory or imperialism. Those battles may once have been seen as optional, but they were never obligatory, and today should be seen as prohibited. If we think Iraq was wrong to attack Kuwait in 1990 to conquer its oil fields, and Russia was wrong to attack Ukraine to restore its empire, then we, too, must reject imperialist warfare.

Yet the category of *milhemet reshut* might also be expanded to include a more complex form of discretionary warfare, in which Jews are neither expansionist aggressors nor passive victims. In the Talmud, the Sages consider a sort of war in which, in anticipation of an upcoming battle, a military moves to meet the enemy on the enemy's side of their shared border. The motivation for such anticipatory warfare is, in the words of the Sages, for the Jews "to reduce their enemies so that they [the enemies] will not come and wage war against them" (Sota 44b). Are these "commanded" or "discretionary" wars? The Sages aren't sure.

In one presentation of the debate, a prominent Sage deemed *any* anticipatory strike as



discretionary. But most Talmudic Sages seem to disagree with that clear-cut distinction and render some anticipatory action as “commanded.” Unfortunately, they don’t specify where to draw the line separating discretionary from commanded anticipatory wars, leaving the later commentators to debate which type of anticipatory warfare was under discussion in the first place.

Were the sages referring to an incipient attack with enemy soldiers gathering on the border, akin to what we’d call a “preemptive strike”? Or were they talking about a more distant threat that might be brewing but was still somewhat ambiguous? Some alternatively suggest that the debate was about utilizing aggressive military might to deter hostile enemy activity despite the absence of any clear threat, i.e., a “preventative strike.” According to one medieval interpretation, favored by many 20th century rabbinic scholars, this was what Maimonides had intended when he found it allowable for a king to “expand the borders of Israel,” i.e., to cross the border and stop a nascent threat.

The rabbinic discourse understands there to be a spectrum of legitimate anticipatory attacks. Some preemptive actions may be obligatory, while more preventative actions are generally discretionary (the proper way to translate *reshut* in this context). This latter category of wars, when not for the purpose of imperialist expansion, remains permissible. Yet as a *milhemet reshut* rather than a *milhemet mitzvah*, it requires additional deliberation and approval, as well as limitations on conscription. Leaders will need to convince their advisory circle that launching a discretionary war is the right move, and they must ensure their soldiers believe in the cause. Significantly, self-defense is the only acceptable motivation behind such discretionary warfare, not imperial expansionism.

How should we evaluate potential threats to determine when fighting is truly necessary or more discretionary? The Talmud famously asserts, “If one comes to slay you, rise and kill first.” Yet, what if it’s not so clear that they are coming to slay you—or that even if they are planning to come to slay you, it is imminent? The wisdom and morality of an anticipatory attack is greatly contingent on the risk evaluation— regarding both the imminence of the threat and the ability to gain military advantage by acting now.

The State of Israel has struggled with the question of anticipatory strikes throughout its history. In 1956, the leaders of the Mapam party were against attacking Egypt before it received a large shipment of Czechoslovakian weapons that might change the arms balance in the Middle East. David Ben-Gurion, however, pushed to defeat the threat before it got out of control. Before the Six-Day War, ministers in the National Religious Party were at first adamantly opposed to preemptively attacking Egypt. Others prevailed, however, and Israel achieved its greatest military victory. Shimon Peres warned Menachem Begin in 1981 against striking the Iraqi nuclear plant in Osiraq. “What is meant to prevent [disaster] can become a catalyst [for disaster].” Begin moved forward anyway, and that preventative strike worked out.

Discretionary preventative wars endangering the lives of soldiers and citizens alike require a well-reasoned justification. It is precisely for this reason that the Sanhedrin's approval was necessary in ancient times. Their approval gave moral support for enlistment in just causes, while serving as a check on the potential abuse of monarchical power. I would argue that the necessity of gaining and retaining popular support for anticipatory warfare has only increased in the modern era. As the historian Victor Davis Hanson contends, democratic societies will not lend support to extensive preventative wars. "A controversial gamble," he notes, "cannot garner continued domestic public support if the attack instead leads to a drawn-out, deracinating struggle, the very sort of quagmire that preemption was originally intended to preclude."

This is not just a strategic consideration but a moral one. When gambling with an anticipatory attack, one must prefer courses of action that prevent the extensive bloody warfare one is seeking to avoid. Accordingly, an optimal preventative strike should be short; it should quickly incapacitate the threat and hopefully also induce political concessions. The state must focus on eliminating the direct threat and buttressing the immediate security interests of its citizens.

Yet, in my view, the most important element of a discretionary war is recognizing that there is a choice to be made. The concept of a "no-choice war" (*milkhamaot ein bereira*) emerged even before the Israeli state was founded, to express the notion that Zionists had no alternative but to fight wars that were imposed upon them. In such situations, many would even say that Jews were "forced" to fight for their survival, or that war was "forced upon them." This claim was crucial to the ethos of the Haganah and later the IDF: the implied claim is that Jews wage war only as an absolute last resort.

Frequently, an honest assessment indicates that war is the best resort but not the only resort. In the absence of an imminent invasion, other options remain available. This choice doesn't make the war any less necessary or less moral. All strategic decisions are based on imprecise calculations. As ethicists Brian Orend and Helen Frowe argue, "last resort" means that we seek first the least-violent method of neutralizing a threat and that we not hastily resort to force. Yet there is no formula for determining the "least-violent method" or what constitutes "hastiness," leaving room for reasonable discretion. One must account for both short-term and long-term costs and benefits.

It's much easier to gather support for patriotic self-sacrifice when one has no option but to fight. Soldiers are certainly more enthusiastic about going into battle when they feel that their homeland is threatened. It's not surprising that President Bush repeatedly asserted that the second Iraq War was a war of necessity. As a sound bite, a "no-choice" war certainly sells better than a "best-guess-option-under-the-circumstances" war.

Yet the "no choice" rhetoric distorts the moral framework for debating such decisions. The choice/no-choice dichotomy leads both opponents and proponents of force to overstate their

case in absolute terms. As the British military strategist Lawrence Freedman has noted, it was the Sages who recognized that this was an overly simplistic binary. In the absence of armed invasion, it's not clear whether one should launch an anticipatory attack. That doesn't mean that going on the offensive is unjust or that it wasn't done for the sake of self-defense. It does require great deliberation. With good reason, preventative attacks are called "discretionary wars."

The time to strike Hamas preemptively has passed. Given the threats it is likely to face in the future, Israel will need to learn the lessons from its triumphs and mistakes, including the risks taken and the roads not travelled. It has decisions to make. There's nothing unethical, per se, about a discretionary war. It could be a very moral decision. We just need to be honest that it is a choice.

## Endnotes

[1] *Responsum Mishpat Kohen*, nos. 144, 145.

[2] See Meiri to Sotah 42a, Nahmanides' addenda to Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* (negative commandment #17); and R. Isaac Abarbanel's comments to I Samuel 8:4-6 and Deuteronomy 20:10.

[3] See R. Haim Hirschensohn, *Malki Ba-Kodesh*, Vol. 1, p. 149; R. Isaac Herzog, *Têhuka LeYisrael al pi HaTorah*, Vol. 1, p. 129 and Vol 2, p. 33; and R. Shaul Yisrael, *Amud HaYemini*, siman 16; and R. Yehuda Gershuni, "Milhemet Mitzvah u-Milhemet Reshut," *Torah She-Ba'al Peh* 13 (5731), p. 149-150. See also R. Eliezer Waldenburg, *Hilkhot Medina*, Vol. 2, p. 119.

[4] *Pinkasei HaRaayah*, vol. 1 (Boisk), #34, p. 29-30.

# We Need to Stay in the Conversation

**Sarah Wolf**

**Sarah Wolf** is Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

In the weeks since October 7, Jews have struggled with the question of whether to stay in community with others who hold political positions they find troubling, emotionally painful, or even harmful. Many have decided that maintaining relationships across such divides is untenable. This has undoubtedly been true among friends and family members; it has certainly also been clear in the public sphere, as rabbinic and academic leaders alike have publicly announced their temporary or permanent disaffiliation from other Jews. Some of these leaders have chosen to remove themselves from larger communities, whether an academic organization like the Association for Jewish Studies or an entire denomination. Many have also decided that certain positions, often those calling for a total ceasefire or expressing criticism as well as solidarity, are too far outside the mainstream and those that hold them should not be included in Jewish spaces—a position essentially echoing Natan Sharansky and Gil Troy’s denunciation of critics of Israel as “**un-Jews**” a few years ago.

In an atmosphere of increasingly visible antisemitism on the left and on campus, and, of course, in the aftermath of one of the darkest days in Jewish history in recent decades, the instinct to draw boundary lines is understandable. At this moment, however, I want to urge Jewish communal leaders, and especially fellow Jewish academics, to push themselves towards more openness and humility regarding others’ positions, as painful and difficult as that may be. I don’t expect anyone’s mind to change at this moment, and I am not even proposing “dialogue.” I do, however, urge that we do not remove ourselves from communities at moments when the conversation seems too difficult, and that we do not attempt to remove others from our communities, even those with whom we vehemently disagree. To commit to community with our ideological others, especially at a challenging time like this, allows us to live up to the best of what the college campus represents, and to embody the respect for diverse opinions that is

modeled in classical Jewish sources.

The academic community is undoubtedly in a moment of crisis. My own students in List College, the joint program between the Jewish Theological Seminary and Columbia and Barnard Colleges, have faced an increasingly frayed campus atmosphere as the fall semester has unfolded. Yet, a campus moment in mid-October represents to me the great potential for our students to teach us what it means to continue showing up in communities that challenge us.

A few weeks after the October 7 massacre, an undergraduate whom I'll call Jennie sent me an email letting me know that she might be late to our Talmud class because she was at the UN, demonstrating for the return of the hostages in Gaza. Later that week, Jennie rushed out of the *beit midrash* at the end of class to help block doxing trucks on the Columbia campus. These trucks—which have appeared on the campuses of several elite colleges and are funded by a conservative organization called Accuracy in Media—broadcast the names and faces of students who signed pro-Palestine petitions. The students featured on the trucks that appeared at Columbia had signed a statement calling on their university to cut ties with “apartheid Israel,” and their personal information was displayed under the caption, “Columbia’s Leading Antisemites.” I heard later from another one of my students, “Akiva,” that many Jewish students had turned up to help block the trucks. They came armed with their bodies, with signs, and with balloons from the campus stationery store. Akiva is a List College senior, and he had been out of class the prior week after losing a close friend to a missile attack. He was so worried for his Israeli friends and family that he didn’t know how he’d manage to finish the semester. He was also the one who procured the balloons to block the trucks. He told me that it was one of the most powerful moments of his four years at college.

At a moment of fear, anger, and antisemitism on campus, why would Jewish students devote their already-stretched time and emotional energy to defend supporters of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement? I want to suggest that such a moment represents the fulfillment of the highest potential of an academic community, with an emphasis on the word *community*. My students and the pro-Palestinian students they were defending may be on opposite sides politically, but they are all young people on campus together. They sit in seminars together, they share a dining room, maybe even a bathroom. My students see faces that have been familiar to them for the last three or four years plastered on the side of a truck alongside personal information meant to endanger them, and they feel called to stand by them. In fact, I would conjecture that the Jewish juniors and seniors I teach at JTS already know what it means to be in community with people with whom they passionately disagree, because that is what college, at its best, provides.

Of course, not all passionate disagreements are created equal. As Jews have become painfully aware, some on campus are expressing their opinions in ways that seem designed to provoke, alienate, and even harm others. This is not, however, a new phenomenon, nor is it an experience

unique to Jews. The degree of colleges' responsibility to protect students (and faculty) from disagreements gone wrong has been a subject of debate for the last decade plus. Prior to this fall, the people who primarily sought protection from harmful speech in the recent past have typically been female, BIPOC, and LGBTQ students. These are demographics that have been broadly affiliated with the left, while those claiming the right to free speech, even speech that is perceived as racist, misogynist, or homophobic, have been broadly affiliated with the right. Now, strikingly, the political affiliations of those on either side of the debate have shifted, while the contours of the problem—universities' seeming inability to set clear guidelines around speech—have remained the same: Jews are seeking protection from the antisemitic speech of some people who are affiliated with the left, while, at the same time, pro-Palestinian students on campus are seeking affirmation that their right to express their opinions is protected, particularly when those opinions decry Israeli suppression of Palestinian rights. These desires should both be fulfillable, especially since there is nothing inherently antisemitic about support for Palestine.

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Yet universities seem to be struggling at this moment to figure out how to protect either of these groups. For the campus community to work the way it should, colleges must do a better job of articulating a morally cogent and consistent position regarding whose speech is protected and what that looks like—and at the same time, what it looks like to safeguard the dignity and safety of those who are affected by harmful or hateful rhetoric. This is a task for university officials, and it should be a top priority for all higher education administrators right now.

As university administrations struggle with this task, members of the academic community must figure out how to behave in the interim. Many Jews on campus right now are afraid, and many others are hurt and enraged. Some funders are pulling money; some are looking to divest from universities in other ways. Some of my colleagues in Jewish Studies are choosing not to attend the annual meetings of learned societies like the Association for Jewish Studies, the Society of Biblical Literature, and the American Academy of Religion, in protest over statements these organizations issued in the wake of October 7. What is being proposed is, essentially, a quasi-boycott of academic institutions for not showing up strongly enough for Jews—a kind of reverse

BDS.

I reject this approach. As a Talmud professor who trains future Jewish thinkers and leaders, from rabbis to lay leaders to academics, I implore Jews in and adjacent to the academy to lean into the academic community's potential to help us maintain relationships with those with whom we disagree, even at this moment, when it feels most painful. Some of our students are already powerfully demonstrating this for us—and if others are struggling to do so now, we all know of students who entered college ready to yell, were called upon to listen, and left with a wider perspective. Can the adults in the room model what it means to live up to the potential of our best and bravest students?

My own students bravely modeled what it might look like to remain connected to those with whom we differ ideologically, and even to show solidarity with them at a moment of crisis. The other side of what I am urging right now, which is to refrain from removing others from our communities due to their stated positions, is reflected in classical Jewish sources about the *halakhic* community. Many rabbinic sources discuss disagreements between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, the two groups who followed the positions of two essential early Jewish sages. These two communities were deeply opposed about many questions and took different approaches even in their behavior towards each other, yet ultimately, our sources tell us that they managed to stay within the same wider rabbinic community. For example, though Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai vehemently disagreed about certain laws pertaining to Jewish marriage, mishnah Yevamot 1:4 states that they were nevertheless willing to marry members of each other's groups. This is surprising on two levels: surprising that Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai stayed in community with each other despite their extremely different views, and surprising that the rabbis who wrote about their ancestors *emphasized* their deep disagreement in both belief and practice. But presumably, the sages knew that for communities to thrive, they must commit to tolerance of opposing opinions.

Indeed, Yevamot 14a, a *sugya* (passage in the Talmud) on this mishnah, emphasizes that Beit Shammai adherents remained committed to following their own positions as practical law. The narrator of the passage in Yevamot points out that elsewhere in the Talmud, in Eruvin 13b, we learn that normative practice was established by means of a *bat kol* (heavenly voice), which stated: "These and these are the word of the living God, but the law follows Hillel." It's tempting to think that in response to this *bat kol*, Beit Shammai would have given up and capitulated to Hillel. But, as the Talmud's narrator explains, we know from the story of the Oven of Akhnai that, "We do not pay attention to a *bat kol*," and so it is perfectly reasonable to assume that Beit Shammai would have ignored it and continued with their distinctive interpretation and practice of *halakhah*. In making this point, the authors of the Talmud offer a model of a group within a larger community that persists in holding onto views that some might see as oppositional. Rather than jumping to censure the opposition, we must first ask ourselves what potentially convincing belief could be guiding their perspective. We must push ourselves to consider that they have a

good reason for maintaining their views in theory and in practice, despite their deviance from the norm.

But how can these oppositional groups continue to exist within a functional community? The Talmud's authors raise this question as well, pointing out that such behavior by Beit Shammai could well violate the prohibition on creating factions, derived from the words *lo titgodedu*, “do not cut yourselves.” (Deut. 14:1) By raising this possibility, the rabbis of the Talmud nod to the competing view that what we need is unity. Those who prioritize unity might argue that staying in community with others whose positions are anathema to us will do more harm than good, since it makes the possibility of solidarity more challenging. But the Talmud's authors in the end reject this take and end up approving Beit Shammai's choice to follow their own positions *and* be in community with Beit Hillel.

A later debate between the Babylonian sages Abbaye and Rava further narrows the scope of the prohibition on factions. Abbaye states that *lo titgodedu* forbids a very specific situation: the existence of a Beit Hillel court and a Beit Shammai court in the same city. However, according to Abbaye, if there were two cities, one with a Beit Hillel court and the other with a Beit Shammai court, that would not be a problem for Judaism as a whole. According to this position, then, the existence of factions is fine as long as each faction has some control over their own specific domain, and the two factions thus remain separate. But Rava then objects, arguing that “a Beit Hillel court and a Beit Shammai court in the same city is exactly what the Beit Hillel/Beit Shammai dispute was like!” The principle of *lo titgodedu* cannot apply to a situation of differing courts in the same city—because everyone knows that the model case of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai was, essentially, two courts in the same city. Though they disagreed, they didn't draw apart from each other completely, but continued to occupy common ground despite their disputes.

Rava then argues that the prohibition on factions applies only to the establishment of a single court, half of which rules according to Beit Hillel and the other half according to Beit Shammai. This type of court—which, in the rabbinic legal system, would be dysfunctional and unable to rule on practical matters—is, on Rava's read, the only “factionalism” prohibited by *lo titgodedu*. That means that a single city with both a Beit Hillel court and a Beit Shammai court (i.e., one community whose members maintain ideologically opposing views) is allowed.

In this *sugya*, then, Rava understands “don't make factions” to mean “don't set up a single court divided to the degree that it is unable to make decisions.” I want to suggest that Rava's (somewhat tortured) reading of this prohibition means that he doesn't just think a city with a Beit Hillel court and a Beit Shammai court is tolerable, he thinks it is an important ideal. In this vision, the two factions do continue to exist within the same community, each with their own understanding of what is right, and yet sharing civic space every day. What might it look like to follow Hillel and Shammai and continue to live in a city with multiple courts? Sharing a city



certainly doesn't need to mean each group must endorse the other. It might look like adherents of the two courts marrying one another, but it need not. (Indeed, as the Talmud points out later on the same page, Hillelites at times did reject marriages with Shammaites when they came into direct conflict with their own accepted views.) It means entering communal space—perhaps just marketplaces, bathhouses, and bakeries—knowing that there are people in the room with you who have different beliefs and their own legitimate reasons for them, though you, for your own legitimate reasons, think that they are wrong. It means treating those people with respect and expecting that they will treat you with respect.

I want to suggest that we use the driving force of this *sugya* as a model for how we relate to people in our own communities. Over and over, the authors of the *sugya* raise the possibility that Beit Shammai has gone too far in rejecting Beit Hillel's views, only to bend over backwards to find a way to understand why they might have a good reason to do so. Crucially, the rabbis of the Talmud do not suggest that Beit Hillel must think that Beit Shammai is right, or vice versa. There is no question that Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai are entitled to disagree with each other, and, presumably, they are entitled to be upset by the other's opinions. We can learn from this *sugya* by remembering that we need to extend some intellectual empathy towards those whose views might offend or upset us, and consider in a serious, non-patronizing way why they might think the way they do.

I hope to see Jews modeling this kind of intellectual humility at all levels of the academic community, from department meetings to annual conferences. But the first place we can start is at home, within Jewish Studies departments and in other Jewish institutional spaces as well. Instead of moving immediately to draw boundary lines—and to be sure, lines must be drawn somewhere; even a big tent must have its limits—we can learn from Hillel and Shammai, from Rava, and from the model of the classroom, to approach each other with a posture of inclusivity and curiosity. What would it look like to ask, not rhetorically but honestly and respectfully: Why do you use that term? Why do you feel called to react that way in this moment? What does that slogan mean to you? What is the Torah that is driving your choices?

The entire academic project is, to a great extent, about the fostering of respectful disagreement, whether that happens in the classroom, in the faculty lounge, or in the pages of peer-reviewed journals. Though we all know that sometimes disagreements can go off the rails, they are also the only way that scholarship can move forward and, I would argue, the only way that learning can happen, and that truly functional communities can exist. And as we have seen in Hillel and Shammai's shared city and on my students' campus, functional communities are ones in which people show up and encounter each other face to face. It's easier to yell at someone online, write an angry letter about a statement, or tweet antisemitic vitriol than it is to go up to someone you will have to see again tomorrow and say what you think out loud. This is exactly why it is so crucial to invest in those shared communities, whether that looks like supporters of Israel

showing up to an academic conference, members of a pro-ceasefire Peace Bloc showing up to an Israel rally, or simply any individual returning to the faculty lounge or the synagogue the day after someone there said something that horrified them. And for the sake of preserving community, we must look out for one another at a basic human level, including and especially on campus: Jewish students oppose the doxing of pro-Palestinian students, and people who oppose Israel's actions should likewise be concerned about the safety of Jewish students on campus.

In what is undoubtedly a frightening time, we must be like the sages, like our best students, and like our best selves: we must try to articulate our own positions as clearly as possible; we must maintain faith that many other people's positions are also rational; and we must try to understand them and even support them, to whatever degree we can, while maintaining our own intellectual integrity. It is the only way we can move forward.

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