



Shabbat Bereishit 5784

October 14, 2023 the Shabbat after the Hamas Pogrom in Israel

Maya and Eiley, you've written very thoughtful divrei Torah. As you know, today I need to speak about what is happening in Israel, and your important messages about free will and following our inner compass are very relevant. I know that this is a joyous day for you and your families, and I hope that you feel truly wonderful about what you have accomplished. I'm looking forward to giving you a special blessing at the ark because I'm proud of you. I am sorry that the rest of my words today are going to be sad and very upsetting.

This has been the worst week for the Jewish people in our lifetimes, except for those who are old enough to have been alive at the time of the Holocaust. As many of you know, more Jews were killed last Shabbat than in any other day since the Holocaust, and about 150 of our people, including children and old people, including lifelong peace activists, are currently being held hostage by Hamas in Gaza. Thousands more Jews are injured. The trauma Israelis are experiencing cannot be overstated. Thousands of Palestinians are now dead or injured and 1.1 million are fleeing the north of Gaza. Thousands more Israelis are being called up to serve in the army, where there will be more bloodshed, for our people and for the Palestinian people who are in harm's way as Israel seeks to destroy Hamas and free the hostages.

I want to start by saying that I see all of you. I see you in your shock and your grief. I see you in your fear and your anger and your despair and your

confusion and your worry. I see you in your feeling of disconnection and your feeling of aloneness. I see you in your feeling that no one cares. I see you in your feeling of abandonment by those who you thought shared your values (maybe including me). I see you in your feeling of being hated. I see you in your feeling of being the perpetrator more than the victim. I see you in your shame. I see you in your feeling of just plain pain.

CBE's Clergy Team and I have been feeling a lot of these ways too, and we have spent this week taking care of this community: calling our members who lost loved ones in the pogrom, comforting all of our members who are grieving this brutal assault on our people, talking to our teenagers and our college students who are trying to make sense of this, answering the questions of the children of our community.

These were some of their questions this week:

Why do people hate us so much?

Is it true that they killed babies?

Now that America's so messed up, and Israel too, where can we go if something bad happens?

What happens if Israel loses the war?

How can we stop what's happening to the Palestinians?

Wasn't it all Israel's fault?

Did the Israelis who died have it coming to them?

This is what our children are carrying.

And not just children. Adults too.

Add to that the threat of antisemitic violence from white supremacists in this country, and Hamas's global jihad against the Jewish people yesterday, and Hamas's threat that they will post videos of torture and killing hostages on social media. A member said to me in tears that she had the thought that maybe she should take her mezuzah off her door. This is what terrorism is designed to do. To terrify us. And to make us and the world feel that maybe, maybe we deserve it.

I have taken all social media accounts off of my phone, and I strongly urge you to do the same, at least for now. It has become a weapon of terrorism, and it is aimed at us.

But please, please do not take your mezuzah off your door. Please do not stop coming here to be together. Please do not take your star from around your neck. Please do not stop living as proud Jews. Please do not stop standing as steadfast supporters of our Israeli family, who feel more alone in the world now than ever. Please do not stop calling for the return of the hostages. Please do not stop giving to aid funds. Please do not stop calling Israeli friends and family, here and there. Please do not stop doing all of the Jewish things you do. Every one of them, every Jewish thing you do, matters.

And Israelis and Jews are not the only ones who feel like the world doesn't see us and doesn't care. Two million Palestinian people are trapped inside Gaza, half of them children. Most of them living in hunger. Bombs are already turning their cities into rubble. 400,000 people are already homeless. Now they're rushing to evacuate the north. Palestinians must feel that no one sees them, no one cares. They must feel more alone in the world than ever. And here is the Israeli army with the American army at its back, in a siege that is legal according to international law. But in the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides teaches "when a siege is placed around a city to conquer it, it should not be surrounded on all four sides. A place should be left for the inhabitants to flee, to escape with their lives." Egypt and the international community, with cooperation from Hamas and Israel, must open the southern Gaza border now. Not just for internationals, for Palestinians. We must insist that this happens.

One of the many sad things this week was that Israeli anti-occupation activists — people who've dedicated their lives to opposing the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, at great cost to themselves, who've dedicated their lives to building relationships with Palestinians, to working toward a

future of coexistence and equality – they’ve had to make the case that what happened last Shabbat cannot be justified or explained by the occupation, or by Israel’s wrongdoing. To the teen who asked this question, a question coming out of our social media feeds: “did they have it coming to them?” – Avner Gvaryanu, the fearless leader of Breaking the Silence, an Israeli who has endured hate and hardship for years for standing up for Palestinians, said this: “There are some things that must be made crystal clear: Hamas has committed crimes that should horrify any decent person. As people who firmly criticize Israeli policy in Gaza and the West Bank on a daily basis, it is our moral duty to state things as they are: this weekend, Hamas blatantly violated humanity’s basic moral norms.”

I would say it this way. No one had this coming to them. No one could possibly have this coming to them. There is no history, background, theory, analysis, oppression, harm, or grievance that justifies what Hamas did. None.

What that CBE teen is seeing on social media, and what we all saw on the streets of Manhattan last Sunday, and in the statements of pro-Palestinian groups, socialist organizations, and Jewish groups aligned with the BDS movement like Jewish Voice for Peace and others – the celebrations of the atrocities, the blaming of Israel for the atrocities, the excusing of the atrocities, the silence about the atrocities – this is utter lack of human empathy, this is moral debasement and dissolution. We also are starting to see lies– that there are no hostages, that Israelis and Jews control the media and are tricking the world, that Hamas only attacked soldiers, that Israel is targeting children on purpose. We must stay steady in our hearts and in what we know to be true. In his New York Magazine piece entitled “A Left that Refuses to Condemn Mass Murder is Doomed”, Eric Levitz writes, “In my view, these responses constitute a betrayal of the left’s most fundamental values. Either one upholds the equal worth of all human beings, opposes war crimes, and despises far-right ethno-nationalist political projects, or one doesn’t.... making it easier for their adversaries to discredit and marginalize the broader cause of Palestinian liberation.”

We need everyone to understand what Hamas is. Hamas is a far-right, Islamic fundamentalist terrorist organization with a program for the land of Palestine that centers on the elimination of the Jewish people from the land. Here are excerpts of the Hamas Covenant, produced at its founding in 1988: From the Preamble: "Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it..." From Article 7: The Day of Judgment will not come about until Muslims fight Jews and kill them. Then, the Jews will hide behind rocks and trees, and the rocks and trees will cry out: 'O Muslim, there is a Jew hiding behind me, come and kill him.'" Article 11. "The land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf [Holy Possession] consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgment Day. No one can renounce it or any part, or abandon it or any part of it." Article 13: "Palestine is an Islamic land... Since this is the case, the Liberation of Palestine is an individual duty for every Muslim wherever he may be." "[Peace] initiatives, and so-called peaceful solutions ...are in contradiction to the principles of the Islamic Resistance Movement."

Israel is now seeking to incapacitate Hamas and to bring back the hostages. Those are legitimate goals, and we must not ask Israel to refrain from pursuing them. But we must also plead, pray, and lobby that they stop doing so through indiscriminate bombing. IDF spokesman Dan Hagari said on Tuesday "the emphasis is on damage and not accuracy." We have already heard barbaric calls for annihilation of Palestinians from the Jewish right and from within the Israeli government, and we are reminded that the members of the Israeli government that we have been protesting this year and for many years are still there in this unity government, with their racism and propensity for brutality against Palestinian people. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant called Palestinians "human animals" in response to the brutal attacks. Remember, this is the government that left southern Israel undefended because it was so busy with its divisive, selfish, and Jewish supremacist agenda. Emotions are running very high and the government probably feels it needs to save face, but if the ground invasion is an exercise in blind vengeance it will be an historic mistake. Isn't this exactly what Hamas was hoping for? To lure Israel's tanks into a quagmire in the labyrinth of Gaza where the fighters are hiding behind human

shields? Can we pause before the ground war and reconsider whether it is wise? Many more Israelis will die, Palestinian deaths are likely to be in the many thousands, the hostages may not be found or returned through a ground war, and Hamas may not be defeated this way. Killing thousands of Palestinian civilians will not bring back the Israeli civilians who are so bitterly and excruciatingly mourned.

I need to remind us of some basic things. We are all temporary dwellers wherever we live. Land doesn't belong to people, it belongs to God (as Torah teaches) or the earth or both, depending on your perspective. The Land, from Gaza to Israel proper, to the West Bank, needs to be shared. That has not changed. Both peoples have a legitimate claim and a real history in the land. Both peoples deserve safety, freedom, self-determination, and peace. That has not changed. Any agenda that promotes a future or present where one people rule over the other is inhumane and immoral. Any agenda that promotes a future for just one people in the land, either Palestinian or Israeli, is inhumane and immoral. Where are the others supposed to go?

The left is using an old model of colonialism to explain what's happening in Israel/Palestine. The problem is, the model doesn't fit. And it maps on to antisemitic tropes, leading to a cruel and dehumanizing view of Israelis and Jews. Colonizers do not have thousands of years of history in the land they colonize, as Jews do in Israel, and colonizers *do* have a home country they can be decolonized to. For those who callously called Shabbat's pogrom a "step toward decolonization," I ask that they consider where the Jews who fled from Iraq are supposed to go? And those who fled from Iran? And those from Yemen? And those from Russia? And those from Ethiopia? And how about the Jews who came from Europe after surviving the Holocaust? They were dispossessed of their land, their homes, their belongings, just as their ancestors were dispossessed by the Romans in the first two centuries of the common era and the Babylonians before them. This does not in any way justify the dispossession of Palestinians from their land and homes

and belongings, but it is a fact. Here we are, two peoples, stuck together. There is no way forward without recognition of that reality.

This week, as you taught us, Eiley and Maya, we read from Bereishit, the creation of the world. Famously, this portion includes the idea that humanity was created b'tselem Elohim, in the image of God. All people equally. A text that I often teach from the Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5, comes from this story of the creation of the first human. The rabbis say that we were all created from a single ancestor to show us that we're all equal, so that no one could say "my parent was better than yours," and to show us that saving a single life is like saving an entire world. One of the things that has always troubled me about this very universal text is that some versions of it don't actually say "saving a life is like saving an entire world" They say "saving a life among the people Israel is like saving an entire world." When I first studied this, I didn't know that not all versions of the text include this particularistic phrase, and I didn't understand how a text that is about the very idea that all humanity comes from one ancestor could have this contradictory limitation, that it's about saving Jewish lives. Now I understand how to interpret it.

A CBE parent asked me earlier this week, "Is it OK to just grieve for Israelis right now? To just care about what happened to our people, just for a moment?"

You may have heard the story of the Israeli man who hid with his two young daughters for 10 hours as the terrorists surrounded his home, but was rescued by his father, a retired general. His father, taking only a pistol, jumped into his car at his home far to the north in Tel Aviv and drove down to personally battle Hamas and save his family. The man who was hiding with his daughters is Amir Tibon, a journalist for Haaretz. Amir Tibon was here with us at CBE just a few weeks ago, speaking on the Shabbat before Yom Kippur. His father, Noam Tibon, was an incredible hero that day. But please note that in order to save his family, he did not stop at the first battles he saw on the way. He passed those battles. He did not save all of those people because he needed to get to his own son and his own

granddaughters as quickly as possible. No one would say that Noam Tibon was wrong for choosing to save his family before other people's families.

We live in concentric circles of love, concentric circles of care, concentric circles of obligation, and that is OK. It is OK, it is human, it is right, it is good to care first and most about those closest to you and then outward in widening circles. It is OK to prioritize our own grief before we focus on the grief of others. It is right to rise to save our own people before rising to save others. I understand why our ancestors said that to save a single life among Israel is to save an entire world, when obviously the meaning of the larger text is that every human life has *equal* value, and *every* life is worth the life of the whole world. Both are true. We start with us, but we must not ever end with us. Maya and Eiley, you both taught about using our free will as human beings to do good, about listening to our inner compass to discern the right way to live. Balancing this set of concentric and widening circles is a way to do that.

The Torah tells us that on the day God created humanity, God saw everything God created, and God saw that it was very good.

The monstrosity of last Shabbat is defined and compounded by not being seen in our full humanity. It often is the case that Israelis and Jews are not seen in our full humanity, in our pain and in our goodness. We deserve to be seen B'tselem Elohim, in the image of God, because that's what we are.

The grievous suffering of Palestinians is similarly defined and compounded by not being seen in their full humanity. And just as we deserve to be seen, they too deserve to be seen.

As the leaders of all of Israel's human rights organizations wrote in a joint statement this week, "Faith in the human spirit, in the good that exists in it, is more necessary than ever. One thing is clear to us already now: on humanity and the faith in humanity we will not give up, even in these days, when it is harder than ever."

May that faith be restored for all of us. Ken Yehi Ratzon.