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Today is the 4th week of the war since Hamas' infiltration of Israel on October 7th. Four weeks since terrorists committed unspeakable atrocities, leaving 1400 murdered Israelis and more than 240 hostages still in Hamas' grips. And it is nearly four weeks of Israel's military response in Gaza that has left 9,000 Palestinians dead, including more than 3,600 children. Four weeks of so much grief. And so much fear. And so much pain. And since then, there have been tomes of articles, ideas, words spilled onto pages trying to understand what happened and its implications for what will happen now and next. Like many of you, I've both tried to read a lot of it and also have come close to my own emotional limits time and again as so many of the stories from Israel and Gaza become things we cannot unsee or unknow, but now need to integrate into our understanding of how the world is. And this week, I read something new that has stuck with me that I'm also trying to understand.

I learned that in the pockets of some of the Hamas terrorists who were killed during their attack, were found small pills which were discovered to be Captagon. Captagon is a drug, a stimulant, that causes a person to lose their sense of fear, to not need to eat or sleep for days, and can inhibit a sense of horror. This drug is assumed to have been given to Hamas operatives in order to help them commit the atrocities they did. In an article in USA today, counterterrorism analyst for the IDF, Carmit Valensi, said: "I have to say, personally, that it makes sense that the terrorists were acting under the influence of these drugs. Otherwise, for me as a human being, it's really hard to explain the brutality, the level of cruelty, that they demonstrated . . ."

Being high on a drug does not excuse the vile actions of Hamas on that day or in the days after, but it does tell a familiar story about what it takes to act with unmitigated cruelty to another human being. To choose to or have to erase either one's own humanity or the other's humanity in order to be able to hurt without being limited by the burden of empathy.

And as we know, people and nations have developed all kinds of ways to make it more possible to do harm.

For example, last week at Cornell University, a student who has now been taken into custody, posted deplorable calls for brutal violence on Cornell's Jewish students, saying that Cornell has a "rat" problem and they need to get rid of the "rats." Dehumanization like this is a tool that's long been used to desensitize the world toward the pain of a particular targeted people, thereby permitting their enslavement or murder. It is critical here to note in our fight to hold onto our

humanity, that Cornell's Pro-Palestine groups and many Muslim students quickly and strongly denounced this violent incitement and called for the protection of the Jewish student body.

But in this current conflict, dehumanizing language has been hurled at Jews and Israel and hurled at Palestinians and Muslims. How much easier it becomes to strike if out of fear, rage, and hurt, we can only see the other as an animal, and not as a parent or someone's child or just as a fellow human being.

Even Israel's first weeks of military response in using bombs, rockets, or drones as tools of war which are deployed from a distance, has meant that thousands of Palestinians have died and been brutally injured - including innocent babies, children, the elderly - only to be called collateral damage. While Israel has understandably tried to clear the way in order to get to Hamas' insidious and dangerous tunnel system, we know that "clearing the way" left profound human devastation in its wake. The ability to attack from a distance, as it has in all modern wars, has made way for the magnitude of human life lost in the process.

So what do we do? Many of us are in serious grief and exhaustion and have personal and deep connections to Israelis who have been killed or taken hostage. Some have friends or partners in Gaza and are in utter pain, knowing people who have lost everyone and everything there. Many of us are angry or disappointed in those Jews and non-Jews who can only seem to see the pain of one side, the humanity of either Israelis or Palestinians, but not both. As the war goes on and more Palestinians and more Israelis die, it would not be hard to let humanity slip from our fingers. In rage and fear and hurt and exhaustion and weakness, to let the other be called collateral damage for a just cause.

We are going to need a reliable compass that we can come back to over time to help us find our way when we are in the depths. Because everything out there wants us to dehumanize each other - within the Jewish community and between Israelis and Palestinians, and between Jews and Muslims. The slippery slope slips toward obscuring humanity. So what do we do?

Sometimes Torah seems to have been written for the very moment that we are in. It would be unsettling, if it weren't also so helpful.

This week, in parshat Vayera, we find God ruminating on a question. Having determined that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are so full of evil people, God decides to destroy them and everyone in them. And we find God wondering: should I tell Abraham what I'm about to do?

Why does this matter to God? Well, Torah reminds us, Abraham will become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth will bless themselves by him. He will be a model of how to live. God singles out Abraham so he will be able to instruct his children and generations to come what is "*tzedakah u'mishpat*" . . . what is just and right living, our text says. Torah seems to understand that we and the whole Jewish people will be forever shaped by what Abraham does right in this very moment when God reveals God's plan to destroy these two cities.

So what does Abraham do? God tells Abraham God's plan and without missing a beat, we read: *vayigash Avraham vayomer: ha'af tispeh tzadik im rasha?* Abraham came forward and said: are You really planning to sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?

Abraham is shocked and his first and immediate instinct is to plead for the lives of the innocent.

Now let's be clear - he's got family in Sodom. His nephew Lot and Lot's wife and children live there. But Abraham doesn't ask God to just save his family and to heck with the others. No, Abraham says - what if there are 50 innocent people there, God? He cannot stomach the idea and so bargains with God, at significant potential risk to himself. God agrees to Abraham's negotiation, but Abraham continues. Will you save the city for 45 innocent people? 40? 30? 20? And we realize that Abraham is talking about people he does not know. There is no textual evidence that Abraham knows anyone in Sodom besides his nephew's family, but he has heard that among the evil, there are just regular people and he refuses to obscure even a small number of these strangers' humanity. Not by distance, drug, or dehumanization.

The commentator Or HaChaim says that Abraham uses the expression חלילה לך, "it would be a profanation of Your name, God" if the innocent actually were to share the fate of the guilty."

With a full array of options for reacting, Abraham - the one by whom we are meant to shape our lives - chooses to plead for the lives of the innocent. He can see their humanity through it all. What if that were a beacon for us? Pleading for the lives of the innocent. And what might that look like?

I want to talk about this idea for us in three ways.

First - the hostages. They need us to plead for their innocent lives. To remember who they are and to whom they belong. Two of the more than 240 have been released and one was rescued. The rest - comprised of children, most of whom are there without their parents, elderly in need of medication, spouses, cousins, a baby who had not yet been weaned from his mother, hundreds of people whose well-being is unknown to us - must come home.

Today, in Israel, family members of the hostages are so furious with their own government who they do not perceive as prioritizing them. One father from K'far Aza, where we are now connecting and working toward sending support, sits outside the Israeli military headquarters in Tel Aviv, on a plastic chair, staging a protest until his entire family plus the three year old from next door who ran to his house for help, comes home. This is pleading for the lives of the innocent. We can plead with him. For Gilli and for Ziv, for all of them.

We can plead for their lives by lobbying our own elected officials to apply international pressure for their release. We can plead by praying they are taking care of each other and know that they are not forgotten. We can plead by asking that there be a humanitarian pause in the violence - a pause for their release. This is the request of so many Israeli humanitarian organizations, along

with the voices of President Biden and Secretary of State Blinken. And until they are released, we can plead for their innocent lives by demanding that the Red Cross be allowed to see them and assess their situation. It is not acceptable that no one has laid eyes on these people.

Second, innocent Palestinians in Gaza need us to plead for their lives. More than 9,000 of them have been killed in Israeli air strikes over the past 4 weeks. More than 3600 of those have been children. And of those, More than 2000 are under the age of 12. In an article in the AP about the children of Gaza, Adam al-Madhoun, while comforting his very injured four year old daughter, said: "When houses are destroyed, they collapse on the heads of children." I won't share the rest of that article here, but if your heart can bear it, it reminds us what is at stake for the innocent Palestinians who are dying in a war they did not ask for. I can imagine Abraham falling to his knees in horror at the pain this people has endured over the past month. And it does not diminish our unfathomable pain beginning on October 7th to know and name that. To plead that the innocent should not be swept away with the guilty.

We know that Hamas is not the Palestinians. We know from the study that Rabbi Timoner shared last week, that the majority of Palestinians do not want to live under Hamas rule.

We can plead for the lives of the innocent by advocating that more people be able to move to safer locations or out of the country and that innocent lives are weighed seriously against further destruction. And we can plead for humanitarian aid to be delivered. It began in earnest yesterday because of the pleading of the international community and it needs to continue. Food, water, medicine, fuel to run the hospitals. Even though Hamas is sitting on a rich trove of food, water, medicine, and fuel, as reported by many media outlets? Yes, even though. It is our inheritance to plead for their lives and so plead for the people to have the basic things they need to live, and that humanitarian pauses . . . the same pauses that are needed to release the hostages . . . be instituted to deliver this aid.

Third, future innocent people who are in danger need us to plead for their lives. This category is probably the most complex one, but critically important if there will be a future for these two peoples.

First, to plead in earnest for the lives of the future innocent, Hamas must be dismantled.

But isn't this a twisting of words, of Abraham's legacy for us? How can fighting be part of pleading for the lives of the innocent?

This week, in Israeli media, it was reported that Ghazi Hamad, a top Hamas official, has already promised that they are planning to repeat October 7th a million times if they need to, to eradicate Israel. Weakening them significantly *is* pleading for all of the innocent future Israeli lives in their crosshairs.

And, in an article by Hussein Ibish this week, he explains the danger Hamas also poses to Palestinians. Now, Ibish has nothing good to say about Israel and places the blame largely at

their feet. *And* he pleads for the lives of innocent Palestinians. He wrote: " Hamas effectively perpetrated two huge massacres: the first of Israelis on the day itself, and the second of the Palestinians . . . Hamas's cynicism is so profound that it's no exaggeration to call it an intentional human sacrifice of thousands of Palestinians in a desperate bid to increase the organization's decades-long quest for dominance . . . Hamas knew what it was provoking, and that was the whole point of October 7," he wrote.

A midrash in Breishit Rabbah helps us understand this kind of pleading. It teaches that the first word in our text . . . *Vayigash* Avraham, Abraham *drew near*, draws our attention to how many methods Abraham must have used to protect innocent lives - by seeing all the contexts that the word *Vayigash* is used in. It says: And Abraham employed all of these methods - by fighting, by speaking stern words, by persuading with entreaty, and by praying. The phrase "Vayigash Joav" . . . And Joav was drawn into battle - is used to signal to us that Abraham also had to fight to protect innocent people for the long term.

And yes, there are many who will understandably say that it is naive to assert that #2 and #3 can exist together, especially because of how Hamas hides behind human shields, a true evil. But/and these are the difficult questions that any nation at war that is still committed to its own moral values must consider.

Protecting innocent Israeli and Palestinian lives does not need to continue to be a temporary stopgap measure. It can be so much more.

And that is not the only way to plead for the future innocent people. We will need to add to this midrash's list: to lobby, to direct resources, to help rebuild, to dream and imagine and to commit ourselves to "the day after." To believe that there can and will be a day after. For one day, though not today. But to be part of and support the organizations that are at the center of imagining a next chapter for Israelis and Palestinians, who are refusing still, and even now, to obscure the humanity of their cousins over the border.

Imagine the generations of innocent life that might flourish if the world invests in Israeli and Palestinian artists and visionaries and business creators and youth and educators and doctors, in building up healthy infrastructure and healthcare, imagining lives of prosperity and safety. Even peace. This, too, is pleading for the lives of the innocent, the next generation that will inherit either this tragedy that we have now, or the potential for peace and possibility, which is also on the table, if we will it. If we plead for it.

The Israeli hostages. Palestinians in Gaza. Future innocent lives. A compass, a beacon, a way to illuminate a path ahead through a still dark chapter. It has been a difficult month and this community has shown itself over and over to be a place where love flourishes, where humanity persists and complicated truths can exist together, where we have the capacity to not give up on being descendants of Abraham. So this morning, when we asked again: "will you really sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?," we pray that the answer is no and that we will be part

of the reason that that is true. May we ever continue to be part of seeing the humanity in all people and pleading for the lives of the innocent. Amen.