

Vayechi 5784 Erev Shabbat
Friday, December 29
12 weeks after October 7

At the beginning of our parasha we are told that we have reached the end of our patriarch Jacob's life. Calling his son Joseph to him as he prepares to die, Jacob repeats the promise made to him by God: "I will assign this land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession." It's the same promise that was made to his father and grandfather before him: "to your offspring I give this land," (Gen 12:7), Abraham was told and "to your descendants I give this land," he was told again (Gen. 15:18). And to Isaac (Gen 26:3): "I will assign all these lands to you and to your heirs.... I will assign to your heirs all these lands." Jacob himself already heard these words from Gd when he dreamt of the angels ascending and descending the ladder: (Gen 28:13) "I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying," and then later again the promise, "The land that I assigned to Abraham and Isaac I assign to you; and to your offspring to come will I assign the land." (Gen 35:12). This promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, reiterated throughout the rest of the Torah as the basis for the Exodus from Egypt, for the journey through the wilderness, becomes the goal and destination, the covenant and the home of our people.

For the last twelve weeks, we American Jews have lived in a toxic binary between those who would interpret these verses literally or maximally, insisting that they are proof that the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea belongs only to Jews, and those who would deny the verses' formative and historic role for the Jewish people, insisting that none of the promised land belongs to Jews, and rather all of it belongs only to Palestinians.

Our community includes people who are calling for a ceasefire genuinely out of a desire to end this war, to save as many Palestinian and Israeli lives as possible, people who remain committed to a Jewish and democratic

Israel living side by side with a free and self-governing Palestinian state. I share this desire to save lives, but I struggle with the word 'ceasefire' because of how it has been used as a cudgel to divide our community. On one side of the toxic binary, those who do not believe that the Jewish people have a right to live on the land were the first and loudest voices for a ceasefire. Some made the call for ceasefire immediately after October 7, saying that Israel had no right to respond to the worst pogrom since the Holocaust. Some who were calling for ceasefire claimed that the sadistic, unbelievably brutal atrocities against Jews on October 7 were a legitimate form of anti-colonial uprising and even celebrated them. Starting just three days after October 7th, some falsely accused Israel of genocide, when Israelis hadn't even identified and buried all of their mutilated and burned dead. Some who called for ceasefire saw Israel's defense of itself and its people as inherently unjustified and opposed all military action from the start. These early calls for a one-sided ceasefire made the word "ceasefire" an anti-Israel slogan when it really should be a call for peace.

On the other side of the toxic binary, those who interpret the Biblical blessings of the promised land as proof of the Jewish people's right to all of the land called for flattening Gaza, for "mowing the lawn," for damage over accuracy. Here and in Israel, they closed their eyes and looked away while the IDF used massive US-supplied bombs to kill 20,000 people. Israeli television hosts callously dismissed Palestinian children as "future terrorists." Jewish supremacist settlers went on rampages through the West Bank, killing Palestinians and stealing their land. Members of Netanyahu's government planned for the re-occupation of Gaza by Israel and for the removal of Gazans to other countries as refugees. They said and still say that they intend to fight this war long into the future.

Now we are twelve weeks into the war. A massive humanitarian catastrophe is long underway. 1.9 million people are homeless, starving, without enough clean water to drink, and without adequate medical care. Disease outbreak is looming. 54,000 Gazans are injured, the majority of whom are women and children. Israel has continued to drop massive bombs on the very places where Palestinians were told to flee to.

Meanwhile, Yoav Zitun reported in *Yedioth Ahronoth* on Tuesday that “virtually every day, IDF soldiers discover Hamas militants inside UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) shelters, with their weapons, near children...The IDF sets up snipers...sometimes the terrorists shoot civilians who try to escape.”

It has to stop.

Meanwhile, more than 100 Israelis are still believed to be alive and held hostage by Hamas. Redeeming the captives has to be Israel’s first priority. It is time for a negotiated end to this war.

It is time for supporters of Israel, for lovers of Israel, for those of us who know that both Jews and Palestinians have a past and a future in the promised land, to call upon the Israeli government and Hamas, and the United States and the Arab nations, to negotiate an end to this war.

I have spoken about the more than 2,000 year history of antisemitism that warps the world’s view of Israel and Jews, that debases the left’s morality and discredits the United Nations and many of the world’s leaders. I have spoken about how Israeli so-called colonists are themselves refugees from countries around the world which expelled them or tried to annihilate them. I have spoken about Hamas’s eliminationist agenda which must be rejected. I have spoken about Israel’s right and responsibility to pursue Hamas and defeat it. All of these things are true, and it is still time for an end to this war.

This does not mean that Israel has to give up on its goal to dismantle Hamas. On Thursday, Major General Amos Yadlin, the former director of the IDF’s Military Intelligence Directorate, wrote that after the troops are withdrawn, the objective to defeat Hamas will, “continue outside of Gaza, with the goal of targeting [Hamas’s] leaders and its sources of funding and arms.”

Rabbi Jill Jacobs wrote in JTA last week as she called for a negotiated end to the war, “Perhaps this war can be ‘won,’ in the sense that Hamas’s top

leaders may eventually be killed, but can the IDF really root out every last fighter and every last rifle and rocket in every last tunnel? And if so, at what cost?

“Would it be a victory to bring about the deaths of tens of thousands more Palestinian civilians, whether from bombs, disease, starvation or exposure? To sacrifice even more Israeli soldiers on what Israeli poet Natan Alterman called “the silver platter” for a war that is increasingly unlikely to bring greater security to Israel?...

“Would it be a victory to sacrifice Israel’s relations with the United States, which has increasingly made clear its position that Israel must end the intense phase of the war soon? Would it be a victory to turn Israel into a pariah state?”

We must remember that there are messianic Jewish supremacists guiding this government, those who read the Torah’s promises to Jacob’s descendants as license to displace, dominate, and kill Palestinians. Betzalel Smotrich, in a work he wrote called “Israel’s Decisive Plan,” calls for a new readiness in Israeli society to win once and for all: “a victory founded on the understanding that there is no room in the Land of Israel for two conflicting national movements.”

Major General Amos Yadlin, the former director of Israel’s Military Intelligence Directorate, said this week that replacing Netanyahu’s government “is not a matter of politics, this is an existential need.”

Rabbi Jacobs says, “Those who call themselves pro-Israel need to get serious about which Israel they support. Is it this extremist government, driven by the settler agenda, with a bleak future, forever living by the sword? Or is it a democratic Israel, living within internationally-recognized borders, as a full member of the international community? The long-term security of Israel – ‘victory’ in its truest and deepest sense – will come about only through an Israel with stable borders alongside a Palestinian state and with normalized relations with neighboring Arab and Muslim countries.”

In a cry of deep mourning, Michael Sfar wrote in Haaretz on Tuesday: “The question gives us no rest. It pounds on our temples and rages in our bellies. Who will we be after the war?....

“And really, what will be the image of a society that in its endless and axiomatic rightness killed tens of thousands, most of them children, women and the elderly? Indeed, they were killed in the aftermath of a horrifying and unforgivable crime. And yet. My grandmother,” Sfar wrote, “who survived the Holocaust after escaping with her mother and sisters from the actions in the Warsaw Ghetto and hid until the end of the war in attics and cellars, wrote in her memoirs, that the greatest challenge in the face of the extreme inhumanity was to maintain humanity.

Sfar asks, “What will our deeds in recent weeks etch into our souls – the destruction of cities, towns, villages and refugee camps, the total demolition of residential neighborhoods and civilian infrastructure, the erasure of families and leaving hundreds, if not thousands of children orphaned?

“How many tons of coldness and indifference have settled inside us in order for us to turn high-rise buildings into dust, promenades and plazas into ruins and a million and a half people into displaced people who have nothing? Is there a way back from the hardness we have decreed on our hearts in the face of hundreds of thousands of people who because of our war are fighting like animals for pieces of food, a safe place where their children can lay down their heads, medicine, clean water and dignity?

“And what will become of a society whose media outlets, which provide it with information about its deeds, have refrained for over 10 weeks from bringing even a single interview – a single one! – with a resident of Gaza to tell what's happening to them; who censor the pictures of the dead children and the weeping mothers, the children that we killed and the mothers whose bereavement we caused? The Israeli TV channels are shaping our collective perceptions not only by means of what they show, but also, and perhaps mainly, by means of what they're hiding from us.”

On Wednesday night Israel's channel 13 reported that the Israeli government with US support offered Hamas a deal for the exchange of hostages and prisoners which would include the withdrawal of Israeli forces from populated areas in Gaza and the entry of large quantities of medical supplies. According to the report, Hamas rejected the deal.

Let us all add our voices in urgent support of this effort and others that would bring the hostages home, end the humanitarian crisis, and bring us to the end of this war, now. Sometimes people forget that the end to this war can only happen if both sides agree, Hamas as well as Israel. All of those who are calling for ceasefire should direct their calls equally to Hamas and to Israel to demand that both come to the table to negotiate release of hostages and the end of this war.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who was originally in the Likud party, wrote today in Haaretz: "...the time has come for Israel to express its readiness to end the fighting. Yes, end the fighting. Not a pause and not a temporary cessation of two, three or four days. An end to the hostility, period. At that time, Israel will need to bring back the hostages, those who are alive and those who are dead. If we wait, it won't be long before the only ones we can bring back will be the dead, because there won't be any living ones. A cessation of hostilities must be conditioned on the release of all the hostages, every last one of them...."

Some people who are calling for a ceasefire mean a unilateral end of fighting by Israel without the release of hostages. Let me be clear: I do not support that. But many others who are calling for ceasefire are calling for what Ehud Olmert just called for: a bilateral, negotiated end to the war with the release of all hostages. This is what I am calling for too.

In our parasha, just after Jacob tells Joseph of Gd's promise of the land, he blesses Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Menashe, with these words:

“The God in whose ways my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,

The God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day—

May the angel who has protected me from all harm—

Bless these lads.”

The Zohar (1:227b) comments that the blessing of children, even though the parent who offers it sees it as complete, does not give the child full pleasure until it also includes their own children, [until it is fulfilled in the next generation] .

As Rabbi Art Green comments, “How especially true is this in our day, when we keep asking ourselves what sort of world it is that we are leaving for the next generations. It is for them we need to ask – but also to create! – blessing. We hope that the blessings we give to Y-H-W-H – more through our deeds than through our words – will help to create a world of blessing for those who come after us.”

Please let us begin 2024 with an agreement to release all hostages and end this war.

Shabbat Shalom.