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**We’ve Lost So Much. Let Us Not Lose Our Damn Minds.**

*After the atrocities in Israel on Simhat Torah, among the worst in Jewish history,   
we must remember the healing power of community,   
and the importance of compassion, solidarity and showing up.*

**Bereishit 5784—October 14, 2023**

When the holiday of Simhat Torah lands on shabbat, we are called to experience a double dose of joy.

This year, Shabbat Simhat Torah saw depravity and cruelty wrought upon our family in Israel, in the form of atrocities that defy all logic and reason. There is no justification, no context that could excuse the brutality and terror that Hamas visited upon our people last Saturday.

History has been marked by sporadic, obscene spasms of violence directed against the Jewish people: from the blood libel massacres at York Castle to Mainz and Cologne… to the Chmeilnicki Pogroms to Kristallnacht and so many more. The massacre of Simhat Torah 5784 will go down in history as among the most horrific in Jewish history.

The Holocaust has been, as Rabbi Shulweis so perceptively stated and I often quote, the dominant psychic reality of the Jew in our time. I and we have had to work hard to deepen our roots and honor our history, without looking at the whole world through Shoah-colored glasses.

And even still, it would be impossible for stories from Kibbutz Beeri and Kfar Azza and the Festival dance party not to trigger our multigenerational Holocaust trauma. Entire families slaughtered. Families smoked out of safe rooms as their homes were set on fire, and then taken at gunpoint into captivity. Women being degraded, abused, assaulted. Shoah survivors—those who came face to face with unmitigated evil and prevailed—now once again forced to confront what happens when human beings manually override their instinctive humanity, and plunge into the depths of darkness and human cruelty. Babies… I can’t even say out loud what they did to the babies.

And, as I have found myself saying again and again over the course of the past week, adding to our shock, anguish, heartache, and fear is an existential loneliness. I have felt it—and I know many of you have too.

The clear message from many in the world, especially from *our* world—those who claim to care the most about justice and human dignity—is that these Israeli victims somehow deserved this terrible fate.

This week I read statements from longtime allies that shock the conscience—some so implausible that I had to reread them multiple times to make sure they weren’t farce or satire… In these statements, was not only a failure to condemn the atrocities against innocents, but proud support for Hamas. This week we entered the upside-down world, when a retrograde, totalitarian, misogynistic terror regime became, for the time-being, the hero of the left. How could it be?

To justify barbarity *in the service of decolonization and the liberation of Palestine* requires more than an ideological commitment to Palestinian freedom. It demands mental and emotional contortions that render a person fundamentally unable to see the humanity of a Jew. It requires a deeply internalized association with Jews and power—the Jew as *oppressor*, the Jew as *victimizer*—so much so that even a horrific terror attack, even teenagers and elders being carted naked through Gaza, does not evoke a gasp of horror or a tear.

How does a person look at a campaign of annihilation and see a quest for liberation? Seeing every and any Jew—whether a 74 year old feminist peace-maker who drove Palestinian children for chemo treatments in Israeli hospitals, or a savta and her special needs granddaughter, or a small boy who looks too much like my son, or a mother and daughter from Chicago visiting their grandma or a beautiful 23-year old American who loves soccer and building bridges and making art for peace—seeing these people as legitimate targets for murder or abduction, you must first have ingested a full diet of genocidal antisemitism. I’m not talking only about Hamas. I’m talking about their defenders here and around the world.

You know that for decades I have strongly and unequivocally opposed the occupation, and Israel’s increasingly hardline, ultra nationalist, and now messianic government. I used my biggest pulpit of the year—[Yom Kippur](https://ikar.org/sermons/this-is-the-moral-earthquake-rabbi-sharon-brous/)—to warn against a growing racism and religious extremism in the Israeli government that I believe threatens the whole project of the state of Israel. This has not been easy in our current climate—I have received death threats and lost friends for speaking this way over the years, for insisting that both Torah and Jewish history demand that we do better. That the only liberation is a shared liberation. That our destinies—as Jews and Palestinians—are tied up in one another.

I still believe all of that. In fact, it is precisely from that particular moral vantage point that I say today, unequivocally: *defending Hamas’s atrocities does not signal that you care about justice for Palestinians.* It only reveals that you accept the same tropes of Jewish power that led to those murderous rampages in Europe and throughout Jewish history: the potent, ancient lie that any Jew is responsible for the behavior of every Jew. The certainty that Jews, all Jews, any Jews, are Satan’s spawn, responsible for killing God. Responsible for the Black death. Responsible for economic collapse. Responsible for migrant caravans and hurricanes and space lasers. Responsible for COVID. Responsible for all human suffering.

We’re not the first to experience a sense of existential loneliness. Sixty years ago, Rav Soloveitchik wrote of the historical loneliness of the Jew—a loneliness that I felt profoundly this week. I know many of you did too.

Yehuda Kurtzer recently shared Leo Strauss’s writing on Spinoza’s critique of Religion. He wrote of “the problem of the western Jewish individual, who… severed his connection with the Jewish community in the expectation that he would just become a normal member of a purely liberal or a universal human society, and who is naturally perplexed when he finds no such society.”

Maybe you can relate.

Thankfully, many of us have found solace in our Jewish community, which has drawn us in this week with its promise to hold and be held with only tenderness. No hand-wringing. Just sorrow and solidarity.

And this is precisely what Strauss concludes: “The solution to [the Jew’s] problem,” he writes, “is to return to the Jewish community…” I asked my daughter in college if she wanted to get out of the city for shabbat, get away from a truly hostile and toxic campus environment. “I need to be with my Jewish community, Ima,” she said.

It is within community that I have been reminded of the beauty, strength, and resiliency… the power of this Jewish collective. Our IKAR community has gathered again and again, holding one another with grace and tenderness.

And our Jewish community overseas? Even as my Israeli friends and family are going to funerals and shivas literally every day, they have mobilized, driven not by retribution and rage, but by their own sorrow and solidarity, collecting thousands of boxes of diapers and flashlights, breast milk, baby food, and sleeping bags for the refugees from the border communities, now uprooted from their homes. Israeli civil society has risen up in this moment to keep people safe, to provide for one another and to give each other comfort, consolation, and hope in the darkest chapter. That is community.

But even still, the loneliness persists. I think it’s because of the split Jewish psyche, which I have spoken about here many times before. It’s not enough for us to be an עָם֙ לְבָדָ֣ד יִשְׁכֹּ֔ן*,* a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations (Num. 23:9). Something in our hearts longs to be more than eternally vigilant, eternally skeptical, fully apart. Despite all the bravado, we don’t want to be an island.

Because most of us have also internalized a universalist impulse, sourced from this week’s *parasha*, right at the beginning of creation: לֹא־ט֛וֹב הֱי֥וֹת הָֽאָדָ֖ם לְבַדּ֑וֹ*—It’s not good for a person, or a people, to be alone* (Gen. 2:18). We yearn to cast our lot with humanity. We believe that we, too, are all caught up in an inescapable network of humanity. As much as we strive to build self-reliance, we—like all people—hunger to be understood. To be seen in our suffering.

Our humble ask is that people give a damn when we die. And it visits an additional anguish on our broken hearts when they do not.

But even as I hold grave disappointment with those who refuse to see us, even as I shudder to think how deeply the antisemitism is embedded in the system that people can’t even see it, even still, I know in my heart that we are not actually alone.

One week after this most horrific attack on the Jewish people, I am asking that as much as we do not let those who seek to destroy us prevail, neither do we let those who suffer from gross moral miscalculations define this moment. Let us not let the algorithm dictate our world view.

In fact, those cruel, callous voices are not the only voices. Even as my heart ached this week, our Congressperson, Rep. Sydney Kamlager Dove called and texted me multiple times to check in, to share her anguish and condemnation, to ask how I and our Jewish community are holding up, and to see how she could be of support. Our district attorney, George Gascon, DA of one of the largest cities in the country, called repeatedly to say it was his top priority to help our community feel safe amidst the threats of violence and upheaval. Our mayor, Karen Bass, showed up with dozens of other elected officials with only hours of notice to stand with the Jewish community on Sunday night. And so many preachers and friends—including Palestinian friends—reached out to see if my family, our family, was safe, and to express deep sorrow even as they nursed their own broken hearts.

It is a human instinct to key into what’s missing, often at the expense of what is present before us. Gaslighting in the face of real tragedy greatly exacerbates our pain. But it is not everything. It’s not even most of what’s happening. The President of Auburn Seminary, a Black Christian theologian, reached out to me with care and very eagerly took up my request, along with my dear Shifra Bronznick, that we build a multi faith campaign to free the captives.

On Yom Kippur, in the conversation with Dr. Murthy, the Surgeon General, I shared the midrash about *Adam haRishon*, the first person, on the sixth day of creation, at the end of his first day of his life. The sun begins to set, and Adam starts to panic. He wonders if maybe he did something wrong. As the sky blackens, he becomes increasingly fearful. Could it be that the world is ending?

Eve must be scared by Adam’s tears and his anxiety. His vulnerability. But she doesn’t retreat from him. Instead, she comes close. She sits down, right across from him (*k’negdo)*. And they hold each other all night long, weeping and wailing until—to their astonishment—the world does not return to null and void. Instead, the first hint of a new dawn arises.

It is then that they realize: *this is the way of the world.*

This, I believe, is the great question of our lives: When the night comes, who will sit and weep by your side? Who shares your worry? Who will not be scared away by your grief, but will come closer? Who sees you? And who do you see?

As we walk into this unknown future, full of grief and uncertainty, I thank this community for stepping closer, in the depths of our heartache this week. Please, let us continue to find our way to each other with tenderness. We need one another now.

And I thank our friends and allies, who also came close, despite your own anguished hearts.

And I ask us to promise that this feeling of isolation and loneliness, the yearning for solidarity, will remind us of the sacred responsibility to step closer, rather than hide, equivocate and retreat ourselves when another people is suffering. We, who have been excluded by the narrow scope of others’ moral concern, must not narrow the scope of our moral concern to exclude others. Do you understand what I’m saying? Just because others have lost their damn minds, we must not lose our damn minds.

Sadly, I know that the days ahead will give us many opportunities to be the kinds of allies and friends we wish we had been embraced by this week. It is precisely my unremitting desire for my own pain to be validated that will guide me in validating and crying out with other human beings in suffering, including Palestinian civilians in Gaza, for whom the situation is already unbearable and becoming increasingly desperate.

I close by amplifying the words of the mothers. Rachel Goldberg, a close friend and family to many in our community, is the mother of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, who was abducted from the Festival, and brought into Gaza. He lost his arm while protecting friends from Hamas bullets and grenades. He is badly wounded and has not been heard from for a week. These are Rachel’s [words](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/12/opinion/israel-hamas-hostage.html?searchResultPosition=2):

*I want things to go back to how they were before Saturday morning. Before I saw Hersh’s text messages that alerted me he was in grave danger: “I love you” and “I’m sorry.” Before Hamas launched its attacks, which have claimed more than 1,200 innocent lives in Israel and resulted in about 150 innocent hostages being held in Gaza with no foreseeable way out. Before my son’s phone was a black box with no answer.*

*But here we are, stuck in the awful present. Time is slowly ticking into the future, with these hostages approaching a week in captivity. If he is still alive, how much longer can he survive? His wounds are grievous. I hope someone somewhere is being kind to him, caring for him, attending to him.*

*Hersh is my whole world, and this evil is the flood that is destroying it. I really don’t know if anything can save it. If anyone knows, please tell me. To save a life, our sages taught, is to save a world. Please help me save my son; it will save my world.*

*Every single person in Gaza has a mother, or had a mother at some point.*

*And I would say this, then, as mother to other mothers: If you see Hersh, please help him. I think about it a lot. I really think I would help your son, if he was in front of me, injured, near me.*

Rachel’s words reminded me of the prayer for the mothers, written by my friend Rabbi Tamar Elad Appelbaum and her friend, Sheikha Ibtisam Mahameed.

*God of Life  
Who heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds  
May it be your will to hear the prayer of mothers  
For you did not create us to kill each other  
Nor to live in fear, anger or hatred in your world  
But rather you have created us so we can grant permission to one another to sanctify  
Your name of Life, your name of Peace in this world.*

*For these things I weep, my eye, my eye runs down with water  
For our children crying at nights,  
For parents holding their children with despair and darkness in their hearts  
For a gate that is closing, and who will open it before the day has ended?*

*And with my tears and prayers which I pray  
And with the tears of all women who deeply feel the pain of these difficult days  
I raise my hands to you please God have mercy on us  
Hear our voice that we shall not despair  
That we shall see life in each other,  
That we shall have mercy for each other,  
That we shall have pity on each other,  
That we shall hope for each other*

*And we shall write our lives in the book of Life  
For your sake God of Life  
Let us choose Life.  
For you are Peace, your world is Peace and all that is yours is Peace,  
And so shall be your will and let us say Amen.*

I say this today: it will take generations for us to recover from the psychic wounds we have incurred this past week. I have a sense that our healing will come when treat each other, mother to mother, sister to sister, brother to brother, as though we, and each other’s children, are our shared responsibility.

Shabbat shalom.