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**We Are Hebrews. We Must Act Like It.**

*We are descendants of Abraham, Ivrim – Hebrews.*

*Rooted in our identity is an ancient call to meet our family in sorrow,*

*to act in solidarity, and even from the depths of our pain,*

*to never, ever forget the humanity of the other.*

**Lekh Lekha 5784**

My Grandma Millie had a rule: you show up for the celebration. (Or, as she used to say: “Go to the *simha*!”)

Grandma Millie lived to ninety-eight, and her beloved, my grandfather, to ninety. I attribute their longevity to the fact that they went dancing every night, never turned down a Dewar’s on the rocks before dinner, and embodied, to the very end, this rule. Here’s the idea: Life is precious and precarious, and you never know what tomorrow will bring. But you’re here today, so show up, body and spirit.

I grew up with this rule. I even wrote a [book](https://ikar.org/the-amen-effectbook/) about it, coming out in a couple of months. What kind of healing is possible, for us and for our society, when we show up—in sorrow, in celebration, and in solidarity?

But when I asked my mother to be an early reader of my book, I didn’t realize that she would so deeply internalize the core message that when it mattered most—like in a time of war, when I was scheduled to be in Israel for a bat mitzvah but seriously considering not going—she would hold me to the book’s thesis and absolutely insist that I *show up*.

So I did. (The guilt of a Jewish mother can be a powerful force for good in the world.) I packed up five duffels of humanitarian supplies and got on the plane.

The bat mitzvah was two weeks to the day after the massacres in the south of Israel. The community there, like here, is reeling. Close friends—including my niece’s teacher of Torah—had already lost beloved children. Debby’s son, Aryeh, a beautiful, soulful man in his 20s, had just the night before led the children in the *Simhat Torah hakafot*, jumping up and down singing with unencumbered joy. Hours later, on Saturday morning, he was among the first called up to help the communities under attack in the south. He was ambushed, and died almost immediately.

The community desperately needed a *simha*, and my sweet niece, with her pitch perfect torah reading and heartfelt *d’var torah*, offered a momentary comfort to our anguished hearts.

גם בתוך העצב, she said, יש המשכיות עשייה ושמחה של הדורות הבאים: -- Even in the deepest sadness, it is precisely *in the continuity of our actions* that we cultivate joy for generations to come.

I prayed that she was right, that reading Torah, whispering the words of Mourner’s Kaddish, lobbing soft candies at the bat mitzvah girl—all of these were acts of defiance, planting the seeds for a future brighter than the present it would grow out of. A time of healing and peace—like our prophets imagined:

עוֹד יִשָׁמַע בְּעַרֵי יְהוּדָה וּבְחוּצוֹת יְרוּשָלַיִם  
קוֹל שָשוֹן וְקוֹל שִמְחָה

*Yet again there shall be heard... in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem,*

*the voice of joy and the voice of gladness.* (Jeremiah 33)

Is this not, after all, the most Jewish wish of all? That even in times of great heartache, we remember that there is another way, a better way. We reaffirm that that dream will be our reality one day, and even if we don’t live to see it, our descendants will.  
  
After shabbat, it was a day of sacred witness. First, to the Expo center in Tel Aviv. Here the leaders of the democracy protests—those Israelis deemed just weeks ago by the governing coalition and their supporters to be “traitors” because of their commitment to a just and democratic Israel—stepped into the void of this absentee government, and demonstrated the power of civil society.

Tens of thousands of volunteers mobilized to respond to the physical, emotional, financial and educational needs of the 70,000 refugees from the southern towns, all of whom have had to be relocated to the center of the country. This [effort](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-stunning-response-15000-volunteers-fill-leadership-vacuum-to-help-victims-of-hamas/)is powered by hi tech and fueled by love and solidarity, forces of untold strength and human goodness.

With my brother and dear friend, R’ Amichai Lau Lavie, I visited the camp of the families of the bereaved in the heart of Tel Aviv, where they sit together with signs holding vigil until their loved ones are brought home.

And then I went to Kibbutz Shefayim. This is a kibbutz north of Tel Aviv, where those rescued from Kfar Azza—one of the small towns from the south that was hardest hit—have been relocated.

The night before, as I was working out details of the visit, I read out loud the text from their representative: *Let’s meet at 530pm so that you can walk around and speak with the survivors.* It was in that moment that my stoic, whip-smart nephew, the kid who spent the previous two weeks volunteering day and night, directing the adults at the depot in how to better coordinate drop offs of breast milk and socks and baby food, it was at that moment that his knees gave out.

“Survivors” he repeated?

And I understood his shock. Survivors? Refugees? These are words of the diaspora. Words of a pre-state Jewish existence. Words that rang through the Jewish experience in Poland and Russia and Austria, in Iraq and Libya and Yemen.

These words are foreign to the Israeli experience—after all, part of the raison d’etre of the state was to build a safe haven, a refuge for Jews fleeing persecution, a place to ensure that we would never again fall victim to the horrors of the diaspora.

But then we did.

The kibbutz grounds, where residents from Kfar Azza were now temporarily living, felt like a displaced persons camp after the Shoah. There were lists, hastily hand-written in Sharpees on giant post its, of the funerals, many every hour:

Bilha Epstein, 10am

Orli Shwartzman, 11am

David Shwartzman, 11am

Roi Idan, 11am

Smadar Idan, 11am

Mira Shtahal, 1pm

Omer Harash, 2pm

Nitzan Libshtein, 3pm

And on and on. Pages and pages of names. My guides, who themselves grew up on Kfar Azza, walked us through the grassy fields of the kibbutz, which were spotted with picnic blankets, each one surrounded by 10-20 people sitting in plastic chairs. “This is *shiva*,” said one of my guides, pointing to gatherings of mourners. “*Shivot*,” the other corrected him. *Shivot*. When there are multiple *shivas*—in this case over one hundred, all at once.

I spoke with some of the survivors who sat in those circles. They spoke of the hunting of Jews. The torture. The degradation and humiliation. The lack of mercy, even for the babies. It was at once something completely new, and at the same time, eerily and unmistakably and sickeningly familiar.

Maybe you heard about the children, Amelia and Michaeli, six and ten, who hid silently in the closet for eleven hours as their parents were murdered before their eyes. *What makes you think* *these stories are even true?* charge the Hamas supporters on the streets. *The Jews run Hollywood—they’re literally paid to make up stories!* Well, we know this story is true, because those children are the family of our beloved board member Liz Hirsh. And their parents, Liz’s niece and her husband, were just buried, the day I was at the kibbutz.

I spoke with one beautiful young woman whose brother was killed in the attacks. The whole family had been together for shabbat dinner the night before. Her brother’s 15-year-old daughter miraculously survived because by chance she decided to do a sleepover at Savta’s house, a few doors down. And they, in Savta’s house, hid in their safe room and held the door shut with all their might for *thirty-five hours* as Hamas gunmen repeatedly tried to break in, all day Saturday and through the night, then much of Sunday.

Meanwhile, back at home, the discourse is beyond shattering. One journalist asked me this week if the antisemitism we are now witnessing was always there, or is it something new in the world? But you don’t wake up one Saturday morning to reports of mass rape, murder and abduction of civilians, and take to the streets to celebrate… unless you already harbor a deep, albeit latent hatred for the victims of that violence.

I ask us to consider: could we even fathom a global news story of atrocities that stirs hundreds of thousands across the globe join in celebration? The dead had not even been counted, and Israel’s retaliation had not even yet begun when protesters screamed “Gas the Jews” outside the opera house in Sydney, Australia. A synagogue in Tunisia was torched.

A professor at my daughter’s university wrote a [column](https://electronicintifada.net/content/just-another-battle-or-palestinian-war-liberation/38661) describing the “jubilation and awe” of witnessing the “remarkable… stunning… astounding… achievements” of what he called the “resistance.” He wrote that piece one day after the massacres. Many of the residents of Kfar Azza—those who were still alive—were still hiding in closets and safe rooms, often nursing critical injuries and cradling their deceased loved ones in their arms.

Shortly after this professor’s piece was published, a protest on campus turned violent as students attempted to storm the Hillel building, what Eva has described to me as the safe haven for Jews on a now hostile campus, while Jewish students inside were in lockdown. Similar images came out from other universities over the next few days. I wonder what would have happened had the protesters succeeded in getting into the building?

Sadly, it's not just a few bad actors. This is a movement, and it was not born yesterday. Like with the white nationalists at Charlottesville in 2017, it was always there, beneath the surface, but waiting for the opportunity and permission to emerge into the light of day. What Trump gave the white nationalists, these professors are giving the antisemites. The gift of unapologetic racist hatred.

I am not an antisemitism alarmist. If anything, I know that many of you have been frustrated with me over the years, accusing me of being almost too forgiving of those whose behavior sometimes betrayed a latent antisemitism.

But now what was concealed is revealed. It is naked, laid bare before us in some of our most vulnerable spaces: academia, anti-racism, and movement spaces, which is a particular gut punch. We cannot build a just society, friends, build a beloved community, while denying, denigrating, or diminishing the humanity of one particular group of people. It’s simply not possible. To ignore this moral blind spot is to endanger not only Jewish lives, but to endanger our democracy.

I know the Columbia professor who wrote so gleefully after our family was massacred has a heart. From his writing, it’s clear that he is truly devastated by the death toll to Palestinian civilians. But his heart, somehow, fails to make room for the humanity of our Jewish family.

That hurts. But even still, we must make sure that our hearts remain open, always, to his.

I spoke with a Palestinian friend days before my trip who lost two of his family members in Gaza, killed by Israeli airstrikes. And I just learned of another, a dear colleague in our interfaith work here in LA, who suffered multiple profound losses among her extended family this past week. This is shattering. I can only imagine that she is drowning in an ocean of sorrow. As a mother, as a daughter, as a human being, I am heartsick.

…Because we don’t have to choose between one team or the other. You either believe that every single person is an image of God, or you don’t actually care about human life.

And we must remain clear-headed: it is Hamas that perpetrated atrocities against the Jewish people, not the Palestinian people.

For those who smugly assert that every Palestinian is Hamas, please her this: Noa Sattath, from Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), shared with me this week a study of the mindset of Gazans, conducted by Princeton Professor Amanny Jamal in September, just days before the attacks. Professor Jamal found that 73% of Gazans favored a peaceful solution the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. 73%. 54% actually favored a two-state solution, an independent Palestine sitting alongside the State of Israel. 20% of Gazans favored a military solution that would lead to the destruction of the state of Israel. And only 15% of the adult population of Gazans supported Hamas.

Think about that. I’m not thrilled that 20% of any population wants to murder my family, but there are literally more Americans [today](https://www.npr.org/2023/10/25/1208577427/23-of-americans-support-political-violence-ahead-of-the-2024-election-survey-sho) supporting political violence against our own citizens and government than there are Hamas supporters in Gaza.

Sometimes the weekly *parasha* is chillingly resonant to a world event that has just taken place. Jumping off the page is the stunning coincidence that this week we read of Avram, our ancestor, learning that his somewhat-estranged-but-family-is-family nephew, Lot, has been taken captive, abducted from his home in Sodom (Gen 14:14).

The moment Avram learns of his nephew’s captivity… he springs into action. He will go to the ends of the earth to get his family home. Years later, Rambam codifies this instinct in no uncertain language: וְאֵין לְךָ מִצְוָה גְּדוֹלָה כְּפִדְיוֹן שְׁבוּיִים --there is no greater mitzvah than the redemption of captives([Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor 8:10](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah,_Gifts_to_the_Poor.8.10)).

Rabbi Yosef Karo takes it even further, teaching: "Every moment that passes without redeeming a captive when it is possible to do so is equivalent to shedding blood” ([*Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 252:3](https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Arukh%2C_Yoreh_De'ah.252.4?lang=bi)).

This must be our north star in the days ahead. Each of us must consider what we are willing to do, personally and collectively, to help redeem our own two hundred twenty-two captives being held by Hamas in Gaza.

Avram literally does everything in his power to retrieve his family. He is, blessedly, able to bring his nephew—and all the other captives with him—back home.

Now consider this: When Avram is told of his family member’s abduction, he is called, for the very first time, *Avram ha-Ivri*, Avram, the Hebrew (Genesis 14:13).

We’ve met Avram nine times already. We know him as a son, a husband, an uncle, a schemer, a teacher, a businessman. Why now does he gain this appellation, *the Hebrew*?

It was only once Avram learned that his family was captive, he became an *Ivri*. This wound—the forced captivity of his nephew—prompted a fundamental change in his identity. He is no longer the person he was before. Many of us can relate. We’ve seen a shift in our own self-understanding these past few weeks.

But what does it mean to be a Hebrew, an *Ivri*? An *Ivri* is literally one who has crossed over. According to the Midrash, to be an *Ivri* is to be willing to have the entire world on one side, and you on the other (Bereishit Rabbah 42:8, *Pesikta Rabbati*, *Pesikta* 33). It means to be a fierce fighter for your people, someone committed to doing everything in your power to right the wrongs to your family, even without the world’s validation of your anguish.

But that’s not all.

Immediately after Avram retrieves his nephew, God speaks to him and says: אַל־תִּירָ֣א אַבְרָ֗ם *don’t be afraid, Avram* (Gen. 15:1). It’s a perplexing twist in the narrative. Why would Avram be afraid? He has just vanquished his enemies—powerful kings who had wrought untold damage. But the Rabbis teach that even though the war has ended, Avram suffered from a persistent post-war apprehen­sion: "Perhaps there was one righteous or God-fearing person among the people I killed,"' he worried, even in the pursuit of this just cause (Genesis Rabbah 15:1).

To be an *Ivri*, this teaches us, is to fight for your family, yes. And also, to never stop worrying about the impact of your actions on others. What harm you might be causing.

In this time of so much anguish and moral confusion, we must strive to be Hebrews. To be *Ivrim*. To hold our Jewish family with deep care and love.

Remember Liz’s family, Smadar and Roi, and their two children who survived hiding in the closet? We initially thought that their third child, a toddler named Avigail, had been killed along with her parents. But I learned when I was with the survivors of Kfar Azza that she had actually survived the attack. When the terrorists left their house, she ran to the neighbor for help. The neighbors, a family with three small children of their own, took her in as their own. They hid in the safe room for hours. We now know that the mother of that family, her three children, and Avigail were all eventually taken hostage by Hamas.

The bereft husband and father of that family was the one who pulled up a chair in the heart of Tel Aviv and began his silent protest two weeks ago to bring home the captives. All of them.

I shudder to think of what Avigail and all the captives have been through these past three weeks—if they are even still alive. An *Ivri* recognizes that our number one priority must be to bring them home. We must do this, without ambivalence, apology, or hesitation, even if the whole rest of the world, intoxicated by violent antisemitism, tears down their posters and pens op-eds justifying their suffering. Even if the whole world is on one side, the *Ivri* must be willing to stand alone on the other.

But the *Ivri* does not stop there. An *Ivri* will never, ever celebrate the suffering of another people. An *Ivri* will never stop crying out for the innocents, even across the border, even in a just war. An *Ivri* today holds the humanity of the Palestinian people at the forefront of our hearts and minds, even as we nurse our own wounds.

This does not make us traitors to the Jewish people, it makes us human. It makes us Hebrews. Descendants of our ancestor, *Avraham avinu*.

Please rise as we offer a [Prayer for the Captives](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1eEjMEz9cPd0EOeBeD1tvRHQYpLF_laIg), and a prayer for peace. For our people, for the Palestinian people, for all of God’s children.

Shabbat shalom.