



## FOUR THINGS I KNOW

*After the antisemitic murder of two young beloveds on a DC street,  
there are four things I know.*

### Parashat Behar-Behukotai 5785

Here's the scene: a reporter approaches a small Indian boy, maybe 11 years old, and shoves the mic in his face.

Q: Long live Pakistan, yes or no?

A: Zindabad (this (زنده باد) is a Persian and Urdu phrase meaning "long live" or "may live forever")

Q: Aren't you ashamed?

A: Why should I be ashamed?...

Q: Long Live *India*, Yes or No?

A: Yes!

Q: Long Live *Pakistan*, Yes or No?

A: Yes! *Long live everyone in their own home!* You too... live long in your home!

Q: ...Aren't you even a little ashamed that despite living in India, you're supporting Pakistan? Why shouldn't Pakistan be destroyed?

A: ...Aren't you ashamed, making this news—about Hindus and Muslims—and spreading it everywhere? Everyone is human! Why kill everyone? Tell me! Everyone has the right to live. Why destroy them?

I must admit: I watched this interview multiple times. I couldn't take my eyes off this boy. He just *knows* what's right and wrong. He knows.

At the heart of Parashat Behar is the mitzvah of *shmita*—the commandment to let the land lie fallow every seventh year. No reaping, no sowing, no plowing. But the Torah immediately raises the obvious challenge to the system:

...וְכִי תֹאמְרוּ מִה־נֹּאכֵל בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִת

Maybe you'll say: **What then will we eat** in the seventh year...? (Vayikra 25:20)

This is a reasonable concern, of course. The Torah intuitively understands our fear of relinquishing control, of living in the unknown. The practice of *shmita* seems to be building our muscle for the spiritual discipline of surrendering to uncertainty, and continuing to live by trusting in what we *do* know for certain: in the case of *shmita*, God's love and care.

I feel profoundly uncertain about the future, and every day I am more aware of what I don't know anymore. But in the spirit of a small boy who knows what he knows, here are four things I *do* know:

## **1. There is no justification for terror.**

Two young people were murdered this week, as they walked out of a Jewish event, an event celebrating Jewish heritage and culture. Sarah, 26, was a Jew from Kansas. Yaron, her soon to be fiancé, a German and Israeli citizen. They were on their way to Jerusalem this weekend, where Yaron had planned to propose. Not that the shooter knew this—a man so outraged by the killing of innocents that he procured a gun in order to kill more innocents.

There is no justification, ever, for terror. There is no just cause that justifies murder (or, for the record: rape, or abduction). The fact that this is a point of contention today is a shameful reflection of the moral deterioration of our time. That this is not among the shared assumptions of those who consider themselves advocates for freedom and dignity is both astonishing and terrifying. A harbinger, I fear, of even darker days to come.

One of the young people murdered on Wednesday night was a diplomat. The other was a peacebuilder. Maybe you read by now about Sarah's involvement in tech2peace—one of many initiatives bringing Israelis and Palestinians together in the service of thickening relationships that will ultimately form the foundation of a just and peaceful future. The very night they were murdered, Sarah and Yaron were hearing from speakers working to deliver urgent, life-saving aid to Gaza.

That fact is, as Sarah's father said, a "tragic irony." Just as it was a tragic irony that among Hamas's victims on October 7<sup>th</sup> were so many peacebuilders. People like Vivian Silver, who dedicated her life to working for peace with Israeli, Palestinian and Bedouin women. Just as it was a tragic irony that Oded Lifshitz—at 83—was murdered in captivity. As his wife, Yochevet said at his funeral, "To my sorrow, we were hit by a terrible blow by those we helped on the other side."

There is a particular shock and horror to the death of peacebuilders, but to be clear: the death of any innocent—no matter their political or ideological position—is a moral catastrophe. The fact of their goodness just makes this story feel even more devastating... because Vivian and Oded spent their lives planting the seeds for a better future, and Sarah and Yaron sound like just the kind of people who were stepping up to work the field, so that one day the fruits of those efforts could be harvested.

One thing I know: There is no justification for terror.

Here's another thing I know:

## **2. Antisemitism is racism. That's not complicated.**

Instead of reporting that *two young people were murdered in antisemitic attack*, the headlines immediately read: *Two Israeli Embassy Staffers Killed*. And yes, both Sarah and Yaron worked at the Embassy. But the Israeli Embassy was located five miles from the Museum, where they were shot. I have not yet heard any indication that the murderer knew where they worked. He went to the Jewish Museum that night to hunt Jews. Any Jews. It could have been any one of us.

As Emma Green so perfectly put it in the [New Yorker](#) yesterday, the gunman “spoke in the language of anti-Zionism, but he acted with the logic of antisemitism, which has as its foundational myth that all Jews are collectively to blame for the policies of the Israeli government and, often enough, for the ills of the world.”

The gunman—and so many of his defenders on social media—collapsed the space between opposition to the politics of a nation state, and violent hatred of a particular people. There is a word for this kind of generalizing: it is *racism*. We who care about building a just society would do well to remember: you cannot fight racism while justifying racist acts of violence. There is no carve-out in building a multi-racial democracy, no vision of a just future that protects everyone *but the Jews*.

I don’t know a lot, but I do know this: there is only a short distance between racist language and racist violence, between violent rhetoric and violent action. We have seen this with devastating frequency over the past few decades in this country: the lethal combination of vicious, inciting rhetoric and easy access to firearms—a uniquely American formula that endangers us all.

So please, do not tell me that “Bring the War Home” or “Globalize the Intifada” is a call to nonviolent civil disobedience in the service of collective liberation. Calling a boy wearing a kippa walking across campus a “baby killer” is not a liberatory act. No, there is an obvious and direct line from this rhetoric to the firebomb at the Governor’s mansion on the eve of Passover, and the two murdered young people on 3<sup>rd</sup> St NW in Washington, DC.

And yet, how confused so many people have become in our time. *There is no courage in murder*. Not at Mother Emanuel, not at the Tree of Life, not at Sandy Hook. And not here. If you don’t see that, you are not a human rights activist. You are a fraud. *If you cannot unequivocally condemn murder of Jews, you’re not anti-racist, anti-war or anti-genocide. You’re simply antisemitic.*

I don’t know a lot, but this I do know: There is no violent path to peace. There is no violent path to liberation. Violence only leads to more heartache, to more anguish, to more violence.

Here’s another thing I know:

**3. We must not allow the dehumanization of Jews to justify, in our hearts, minds, or policies, the dehumanization of others.**

After the murders, I spent an hour on the phone with a friend, a Palestinian from Gaza, a true voice for peace. He has been living in the states for 20 years, but his family is still in Gaza. More than 30 of them have been killed in this terrible war. I asked my friend what he was hearing. How are people

reacting to the murders? He said that most responses from online activists fell, broadly speaking, into one of two camps: 1) denial: this is a false flag operation orchestrated by the Mossad to distract from the starvation campaign in Gaza, or 2) celebration, ala the “stunning achievement” statements of October 7<sup>th</sup>, which made some of the professors in top universities in the country a household name.

That makes my heart ache. It’s a familiar ache—it reminds me of the double shot of anguish I felt after October 7<sup>th</sup> when—in the midst of so much grief—so many people I love failed the most basic moral test: they failed to call to ask if my brother and his family were still alive.

But please... can we be honest? Have many in the Jewish community not adopted the very behaviors of those who keep hurting us? Have we not shut our own hearts to the anguished cries of the Palestinian people? We are so pained by the denialism employed in the service of diminishing our trauma. Are we not guilty of the same?

I don’t know a lot, but I know this: if you’re outraged by the conflation of *Israel* with *every Jew*, but insist that there are no innocents in Gaza, then you are conflating every *Palestinian* with *Hamas*...

...If you’re spending your time debunking exaggerated numbers of casualties from the Hamas run Health Ministry, rather than fighting for an end to *all* casualties, rather than supporting the clarion call of the families of the hostages for an immediate end to war,

...for the return of the hostages, for a resumption of serious talks about a just future... then you have only become the mirror image of precisely what you fear and detest most in this world.

And here's something else I know:

#### **4. We will not look away.**

The world is harsh and unforgiving. The enemies of the Jewish people are less inhibited, more empowered, and thanks to social media, more networked. I can’t speak for them.

But I *can* speak to us. I can help us remember who we are, and what matters most. I can tell you that our Jewish tradition calls us not only to love our own, but to love and care for the stranger, particularly those most vulnerable, those in gravest danger. I can tell you that core to our faith is the moral mandate to protect human life, to treat every person as an image of the Holy One: precious, unique, and worthy of love. And I can remind you that central to our tradition is a collective commitment to the preservation of human dignity, the protection of the possibility of human thriving.

All of that was true before Wednesday night, when two young people stepped out into the cool DC night. And it is still true.

The reason the event Sarah and Yaron attended that night focused on IsraAID's coordination of humanitarian efforts for civilians in Gaza is because the situation in Gaza is truly dire. And with each passing day, the situation worsens.

For nearly 12 weeks, more than two million people in Gaza have been cut off from food, clean water, and medical care. Two million people awaken each morning asking their own: מַה-נֹאכַל – *what, then, will we eat?* Their continued suffering is unconscionable, and has passed the point of crisis, even as limited aid began to trickle in over the last several days.

Immediately after the shooting, the accusations started. And they went beyond pointing out the obvious challenges of delivering food to families without enriching Hamas, whose gunmen have become adept at intercepting aid to the detriment of their own people. Self-serving Israeli politicians pointed fingers: at world leaders, who insist on talking about those hungry children. At the libelous aid organizations—whose sloppiness and obsessive focus on Gaza must mean that Israel is free and clear of any actual responsibility. They're all antisemites! Oh, and don't get me started on *the liberal rabbis*.

I never want, God forbid, to speak in a way that will endanger someone's life. And yet, there comes a time when *not speaking* endangers lives. The protests of Israel's right wing government ministers notwithstanding, *we must continue to speak clearly and unequivocally to the suffering in Gaza*.

The dehumanization of the Palestinian people is a betrayal of our history and our humanity. Endless war, starvation, and mass destruction are perversions of core principles of our faith. I don't care how many rabbis *hekhsher* this ghastly policy of deprivation, we must be very clear: the deliberate blocking of aid from civilians is a *hillul hashem*—a desecration of God's name. It does not make any of us safer, it endangers us all.

Just before these murders, I was working with the team at the New Israel Fund to help relaunch a robust aid campaign to support trusted partners on the ground—like World Central Kitchen—who are working tirelessly to deliver food, water, and medicine to those who need it most in Gaza. We had planned to launch this campaign the morning after the murders. It will now launch on Tuesday.

There's so much I don't know about the world today, but this is one thing I do know: our tender hearts have been torn apart this week by tragedy. But the actions of extremists must not deter us from speaking the truth, and fighting for the good and the right. We must work to protect our Jewish family, eternally yearning for safety, for quiet. And we must redouble our efforts to get humanitarian assistance to the families suffering most in Gaza.

I'm back to that little boy, maybe 11, in India, who knows what he knows. After what seems like an endless repartee of:

Q: So you support Pakistan?

A: Yes I do

Q: Are you not an Indian?

A: I am Indian. You're saying 'destroy that country, destroy that country,' but wherever people live, they [deserve to] live.

... the reporter asks the boy one final question:

Q: I just want to know one small thing: *who taught you this?*

A: Bro, I have a brain, man.

To get through this time of such dangerous, intractable conflict, we have to use our brains, and we have to use our hearts. There's so much I don't know and understand about this world. But as we learned from the ancient practice of *shmita*, our people has been trained for thousands of years to navigate uncertainty by rooting, always, in what we do know. In that spirit, I am holding on to these four things that I know:

I know that every human life is precious and murder is never justified.

I know that if you don't like racism, you can't justify antisemitism.

I know that even the perverse dehumanization of Jews does not give us a pass to dehumanize others.

And I know that innocent humans, created in God's own image, are suffering in Gaza right now at the hand of war policies that make a mockery of Jewish history, tradition and trauma. And I know that we cannot look away.

And aside from all of that, I am certain that our most audacious dreams are born in dark times. And these, friends, are very dark times. So we must grieve, and we must speak the truth. And we must act. This is the moment to reaffirm our dream of a just, peaceful, and flourishing future for everyone. The moment to recommit to the fight for the dignity of every human life.

Shabbat shalom.