

## Accepting War, Pursuing Peace

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Tonight, I want to talk about Israel. Actually, that isn't completely true. Tonight I feel compelled to talk about Israel. After a devastatingly difficult summer for our Homeland, after the tragic, unthinkable kidnapping of 3 Israeli teens, the quickly escalating military conflict which ensued, the accusations, the destruction, the misinformation, and the immeasurable fear, pain and suffering felt by all those caught in this conflict, it would feel, for me, personally, unimaginable not to talk about Israel. As a Rabbi, it would seem to be a near dereliction of responsibility.

But, at the same time, I can't say that I actually *want* to talk about Israel. In part, that's because of how depressing, and how fearful it can be to think about, and talk about Israel, right now. I wish that, on this holiest of nights, I could again talk about our inner, spiritual lives, or about the hopefulness implicit in our annual process of teshuvah. And, I also worry about talking about Israel because it's not always clear *how* I should talk about Israel. As one commentator recently put it, when rabbis talk about Israel we often become B-level pundits. You don't need or want me to talk about Israel's strategic security situation, or anything like that.

But, I do feel qualified to speak about Israel's morality, and I think that it's vitally important that we do so. Because I find myself distressed and bewildered by the treatment which Israel receives on the world stage. I'm not surprised that Israel's enemies accuse her of the most heinous of war crimes. I'm not surprised that their allies support those claims while blaming Israel for the entire ongoing conflict. But, I'll admit to being continually, deeply surprised by the willingness of intelligent, well-meaning people, here in our own country and elsewhere, to buy into that narrative.

This conflict is not a result of some imperialist desire of Israel's to suppress, dominate and eventually displace the Palestinian people. This conflict was not created, and is not primarily perpetuated, by settlements, checkpoints, security fences or anything of the sort. Although some of those surely have been contributors to the impossibility of finding a resolution, ultimately this is and always has been a battle between a country and a people on one side, and a group openly and actively dedicated to their total annihilation on the other. Hamas has always called, explicitly, not for the freedom to create their own country, but for the eradication of the State of Israel. You will never hear me claim that Israel is blameless, but you most certainly never hear me claim that Israel is even remotely close to equally culpable in this terrible, ongoing war.

I am baffled when people accuse Israel of genocide, and condemn them for targeting civilians when they so clearly exert so much energy to try to avoid civilian casualties,

while their enemy brazenly seeks to maximize them, friend and foe alike. I am utterly confounded when a group of academics join together to sign a letter criticizing Israel for, among other supposed sins, notifying civilians before an attack when Hamas literally encourages its own civilians to act as human shields.

To misunderstand the basic morality of the situation is, to my mind, to turn our backs on what is possibly the most significant component of being a human being — our capacity for moral judgment. That's one of the most important but most commonly overlooked lessons from the story of Adam and Eve. When trying to tempt her to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the serpent tells Eve that, if she eats, she will not die. Rather, he says, "you will be like God, knowing good from evil." You will be like God, knowing good from evil. The Torah is telling us that we are closest to imitating God when we embrace and use our moral facilities. That we are truly living up to our birthright of having been created *betzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, when we are able to distinguish good from bad, right from wrong.

Yes, as I said, Israel has certainly done things along the way which have increased enmity and made peace less likely. And, yes, during the conflict — as is tragically the case during any military conflict — some individuals have committed atrocities and crimes. But, that in no way changes the basic moral calculus of this war. I honestly don't understand how generally decent people don't see what seems so morally obvious to me. It's overused, and probably overly simplistic, but Golda Meir's quote still rings essentially true, even today. If the Palestinians put down their guns today, tomorrow there will be a Palestine. If Israel puts down its guns today, tomorrow there will be no Israel.

And so, I am personally and, more importantly, religiously committed to defending Israel's essential morality, and quite frankly, I don't even think it's very difficult case to make. I'm absolutely, unquestionably committed to defending Israel's right to self-defense which is, you should know, a deeply held Jewish value. Offering our other cheek to the one who attacks us is not a commandment found in any Jewish text. We have the right — actually, we have the obligation — of self-defense and self-preservation.

But while all that is true, and while I hold to it fervently, it is at least as important that we remember that there's a difference between a willingness to fight, and an eagerness to fight. There is an essential, religious, moral distinction between rightly assigning blame to an enemy bent on our destruction, and losing our own sense of moral direction through widespread, unyielding, vitriolic hatred. Judaism may not be pacifist — we don't believe that violence is always unquestionably wrong. But, we are peaceloving, because we believe that while sometimes necessary, violence is never good. And that is, I deeply believe, a fundamentally important distinction.

I think of it most clearly when I remember a midrash — an ancient rabbinic story about the Torah — taught to me by my teacher, Rabbi Jerome Malino of blessed memory.

Jacob and Esau, as you might remember, were the bitterest of enemies. After many years in hiding, Jacob returns to try to reconcile with his brother. Esau rushes to him, embraces him, kisses him, falls on his neck, and they both cry. But the word “*vayeshkehu*—he kissed him” has some strange dots above it in the Torah scroll. The rabbinic midrash explains that the word “*vayashkehu*” can actually be read to mean not, “he kissed him,” but, “he bit him.” In this version, Esau didn't hug and kiss his brother; he grabbed him, and tried to bite his neck in order to kill him. But, a miracle happened and Jacob's neck turned to marble. Those dots above the word are pieces of Esau's broken teeth. And the midrash goes on to explain that they did indeed both cry. Esau cried for his teeth. Jacob cried for his neck. He cried not because he had been harmed, but because he had been hardened.

Jacob cried for his neck. It is, to me, among most powerful phrases in all of rabbinic literature. Because it captures an essential truth about violence. Violence always damages us. Irrevocably. Jacob cried because, even though he won this fight, even though he survived, he had been left hardened. He was no longer fully the man he had grown up being. No longer precisely the man he wanted to be. Violence, even when directed at a deadly foe, scars us. Always. We never come out better for it.

The truth is, there are many texts which I could have used in place of that Jacob and Esau midrash. King David wasn't allowed to build the Temple of which he dreamt because he had fought many wars. The fact that those wars were fought for righteous reasons didn't matter at all to God. A righteous war still leaves bloodstains on the hands of the fighters, and no one so stained can possibly build something as sacred as the Temple, God says. When the Israelites saw the Red Sea slam shut on the Egyptian Army, they celebrated with a victory song. But another ancient midrash tells us that, when they were finished, the angels gathered to sing the same song. But, God wouldn't let them. “How dare you sing songs of glory while my people are drowning?” He chastised them. Even the Egyptians were human beings, created in the image of God, and their deaths, while necessary, were not good. It was nothing to be celebrated. That same sentiment is echoed in our yearly ritual at our Seder tables when we remove one drop of wine — each one a symbol of our lessened joy — from our glasses in remembrance of those who suffered through the 10 plagues which set us free. How can our joy be complete, when any of God's creatures are suffering?

As Jews, we are allowed to fight. We are allowed to defend ourselves. But Jews do not dance in the streets at the deaths of our enemies. To do so is an affront to God. We may engage in violence, when necessary. We do not revel in it, we do not seek it out, and we do not want it. Jewish law forbids the carrying of weapons in a synagogue; violence and holiness cannot exist in the same space.

When I hear of the deaths of innocent Palestinians, my first reaction is not that those deaths are the moral responsibility of the terrorists who hide among them, although I do believe that to be the case. My first reaction, at least on my better days, is that their

deaths are a tragedy. I am distraught every time an Israeli has no choice better than one which leads to the death of an innocent. And even the death of the terrorists themselves, as hard as this is for me to believe at times, are not a good. They are not a cause for celebration. I'm saddened by the loss of a life which could have meant so much more than it did, and I am saddened for our necks, which just became a little bit harder.

I care desperately about Israel's survival but I care equally deeply for the souls of those of us who love and support Israel. What I say about Israel here, tonight, or anywhere at anytime, will have an immeasurably small effect on the actual situation in Israel. But, what I say about it, and what I say about our enemies and their deaths, and what I say about civilian deaths, and what I say about hatred and hope, will have an enormous effect on me. To be a Jew is not only to dream of a day when war will be no more, is to actively and aggressively pursue that day, never giving up, never yielding an inch until we make it real. It is to know that our true goal is not the death of our enemies but rather the arrival of the day, ushered in by our own hands, when we can instead embrace them as friends. It is to be, as Rabbi Donniel Hartman identifies himself, a peaceaholic, someone who is addicted to the idea of peace. Someone who, regardless of what happened last time, will constantly and continually look for the next opportunity to make peace, instead of war. To not just prefer peace, to not just love peace, but to seek peace, and pursue it.

I stand by our right to defend ourselves. I stand by our right to defend our families. I stand by our right to defend our nation, both this one, and our homeland in the East. I stand by those rights unequivocally. But, I stand on my love for peace. I stand on my love for all of humanity. I stand on my adamant refusal to let hatred or fear run my life or ruin my soul. I will protect *who* I am, as fervently as I protect my life.

Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky taught that all blessings are grounded in love. Only one who feels love, only one who embodies love, can truly be or create or give a blessing. May this year be one of blessing for us all. One in which we finally find ourselves at peace, rather than winning at war. May our love for humanity only grow, and our pursuit of peace never falter.

And may we all be sealed in the Book of Life.