

Abraham's Fight and Ours

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Three weeks ago, a young cousin, 19 year old Eden Alon Levi, was killed in her army base in Zikim. She and five other officers were in charge of a group of 90 new recruits, training them to serve in home front command to protect residents of Israel. They were overrun by Hamas attackers. Eden and her fellow officers were the only ones armed. The recruits had not yet received their weapons. Eden and the other five officers withstood the terrorist onslaught for 52 minutes, eventually saving all their recruits. At 8.10am, Eden texted her sister Nofar: "I love you." That was her last message. I often think of Eden, young joyful, full of life, whom I saw at a family wedding just 9 days before.

When thinking about Israel and the war in Gaza, most of us have a cocktail of emotions: anger and anxiety, uncertainty and resolute determination, rage and fear, sorrow and strength. Avraham also had multiple feelings. He follows God to an unknown destination, yet is fearful for his life when he and Sarah go down to Egypt. He trusts God, yet is unsure about future descendants. Avraham believe in God, yet must be reassured about the Land and his future.

The State of Israel also has mixed desires. It wants the approval of Europe, Canada and the United States — which is easier to gain as a victim. Yet Israel also knows that it must strike fear among terrorists and their sponsors in the Middle East. As Micha Goodman points out. Israel is not only facing Hamas and Hizbollah. They are the local militia. Israel is standing against the Persian Empire. Fear, not fences keeps others at bay.

A rabbinic midrash teaches that one who is kind to the cruel will end up being cruel to the kind (*Kohelet Rabbah 1.16, Tanhuma Metzora*). My colleague, David Wolpe points to the rabbinic tradition about Amalek, a tribe which attacked the more exposed and vulnerable of the recently liberated Israelites. The Torah instructs the Israelites to remember and to utterly destroy the Amalek people. We need not take this literally, but we can learn some important lesson from the subsequent history.

In the religious imagination of the Jewish people, Amalek became the archetypal enemy. And the Torah warns, "If they remain, they will be thorns in your eyes and stingers in your side. They will vex you." (Num 33.55). Saul, the first monarch of ancient Israel, was commanded to kill people and animals of Amalek. But Saul had mercy on Agag, the king of Amalek. Later, his descendant, Haman, sought to kill the Jews of Persia. Kindness to the cruel led to cruelty for the kind.

Sadly, Israel which seeks only to live in peace with its neighbours, must wreak terrible destruction to remain a credible source of security for its own citizens. Previous efforts to contain Hamas have failed. In 2005, Israel left Gaza with agricultural resources. It remained a source of water, electricity, special medical treatment and work for almost 30,000 Gazans. To sustain the economy, Israel allowed billions of dollars to flow in to Gaza from Qatar. Hamas wasn't interested in governing Gaza. It controlled the population and used the area as a staging ground for hatred. Any ceasefire ended on October 7, Simhat Torah, when Hamas attacked Israel.

Now, as Israel masses ground troops outside of Gaza, it is important to maintain moral clarity. "Moral clarity is long defined by usage as a capacity to make firm distinctions ... between evil and good, and to take action based on those distinctions." But it is not so simple. The philosopher, Susan Neiman, says such clarity can be found only on a case-by-case basis. "Moral clarity... is about looking at each particular case, looking at all the facts, looking at all the context, and working out your answers." The quest for moral clarity is actually complicated and specific to the circumstances.

I want to help a bit today. Hamas not only attacked Israel. It's terrorist troops not only brutally tortured Israelis. It not only sent its attackers with instructions to rape and rip out the guts of Israelis. It not only slaughtered children in sight of their parents, and parents in the sight of their children. It not only opposes any agreement that would allow Israel to exist, It also places its bomb making facilities and missile equipment beneath mosques, hospitals and civilian homes. It also stores in its tunnel system immense quantities of food, water and fuel which might alleviate some of the human concerns of civilians. It holds the residents of Gaza hostage, preventing them from leaving areas under Israeli attack; uses civilians as human shields, and their deaths as photographic fodder for media.

We should weep at the loss of so many lives in Gaza. But moral clarity distinguishes between intentional murder of innocents and the loss of life that is part of every legitimate war. And we must realize, with absolute clarity, that Hamas and its sponsor also seeks to bring terror to Europe, Canada and America. And so the goal of the current Israeli action is clear: “Release the hostages; Punish Hamas and its enablers” (Jonathan Sarna). Should Israel not succeed, the barbarians will be at the gates.

We have multiple images of Avraham in the Torah. Two are particularly apt this week:

Avram is a warrior who goes to battle to save his nephew Lot who had been taken hostage. He is victorious and does not want any of the spoils of war- simply to live in peace. This is the situation of Israel. There is a need to enter combat, but there is no desire to remain in Gaza.

As a result of a war described in our Torah portion, Lot was taken captive. A fugitive comes to report to אַבְרָם הָעֵבֶרִי (Gen 14.13). Why is he called HA'IVRI? Root of word might be Ha'piru- an ancient Semitic tribe of wanderers. A rabbinic tradition offers two other suggestions: He came from **across** the Euphrates river. Stood **apart** from the cultures around him.

In contemporary illiberal progressive politics, Israel is attacked, accused of settler colonialism, a system of oppression based on genocide and colonialism, that aims to displace an indigenous people and replace it with a new settler population. Israel is certainly NOT settler colonialism. It does not seek to displace the Arab population. Jews also have an historic connection to the Land of Israel. Jewish settlement in the land is mentioned four times in this Torah reading and multiple times in the Bible. Equally important for Christians is that without historic Jewish presence in the Land of Israel, the entire venerated tradition of Jesus would be without any basis. Diaspora Jews now must stand apart from the popular culture and maintain the historic legitimacy of our connection to the Land of Israel.

My cousin Eden died to save her recruits and to defend the State of Israel. Diaspora Jews don't have to endanger our lives, but we do have to enter into a serious battle, a clash of values and a war of ideas. We must be victorious. Our lives and the well-being of our descendants depend on our prevailing in this conflict.

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