

For the Sake of Israel—Full Stop.
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When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, “Let there be light” and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from darkness. God called the light Day and called the darkness Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day. (Gen. 1)

This week the entire Jewish people across the world are reading from the same exact words of Torah; the same words we’ve been reading for 2,000 years. When we read Parashat B’reishit we tend to focus on *what* God creates. God creates light; darkness; a huge space in between the ocean and sky; dry land; trees; seeds; stars; the moon; the sun; all kinds of living creatures; God creates humans, to be in charge. All of this is the “stuff” of the universe, in this first creation myth.

What we rarely focus on is the process, the “how” of Creation. This is unsurprising; it’s how our minds work—we see images and those images can tell the story. But images do not paint themselves; ours is a story with authors, and these authors were very clear about *how* God creates: separation.

Before separation, there is a blob of nothingness—chaos and emptiness that the Torah calls *tohu vavohu*. Those two words, *tohu vavohu*, elsewhere translated a “null and void,” are among the most mysterious words of the Torah, precisely because they cannot be imagined. We could argue that even God can’t imagine *tohu vavohu*, because only subsequently does God even begin the process of creating.

It’s from this void that God gets to work; that God separates one thing from another, and God labels each thing, so we can name what it *is* and what it *is not*. This is *how* God acts. This defines holiness, and that Hebrew word that describes our own aspiration to be God-like, *kodesh*, actually means, “separate” or “distinguished.”

In Genesis, God creates words for reality. This week, we can see why. Because every time we try to speak about this *tohu vavohu*, this chaos since last Shabbat, our words fall short. I have little doubt that my own words tonight will fall short. Like most of you, I cannot string together a coherent sensible statement.

We’ve all been reading and listening to profound attempts at solace, sense-making, or prayer—all of which are fleeting, at best, though, more often than not, futile. We know from *tohu vavohu* is there’s a reality that even God cannot name.

There are no words that describe what has been done to Israel—the State *and* Israel the People, inasmuch as such a distinction exists this week.

No words for what Hamas did and does—intentionally and strategically.

No words that sufficiently connect our hearts to the souls of those who were massacred.

No words that rescue the more than 130 hostages—of various ethnicities, political views, and nationalities, including 20 Americans.

No words can instantly transport countless numbers of Palestinian civilians out of Northern Gaza, especially when Hamas is dead-set on keeping them there, in the hell of war.

No words can provide lasting comfort to those sheltering in bunkers, or called to fight and perhaps die; or those who, right now, are praying that their missing children or parents or siblings are being held hostage in Gaza. Let's let that sink in for a moment: that countless Israelis right now *are praying that their missing loved ones are being held hostage in Gaza*. There are no words.

And yet, words are all we have, so we use them—or try to use them.

We try to distinguish one thing from another: light from dark, love from hate, right from wrong. How we distinguish one thing from another, speaks volumes about how we strive to become more human. And we strive in different ways, often conflicting.

So many in this community have experienced the pain this week caused by the ways in which leaders have or have not drawn distinctions:

The distinction between ruthless terrorism and legitimate defense.

The distinction between targeting civilians and armed forces.

The distinction between saying something... and saying nothing.

A great many of us are so pained by the blurring of these distinctions.

Nothing's been more outrageous in the public square here than the volume of support for pro-Hamas terrorists. There is a distinction lost here—the distinction between resistance and cold-blooded murder. We hear widespread respected leaders who are “digging in” with the unconscionable argument that assigns 100% of the blame of the bloodbaths on Israel. I don't need to go through the list of horrific accounts of mass murder. Surely, I don't want to hand Hamas the victory of syndicating the videos they intentionally took, of butchering our people's bodies. But what does it take to wake up our neighbors to the distinction between good and evil?

The death of that distinction is heartbreaking—and a great many of us in this room have shed tears over it this week; some of us have lost friends. Maybe you feel betrayed by your teachers or students or employers or employees. Or your elected leaders. Maybe some of those leaders acted exactly as you would have expected—because you know of the bigotry they harbor in their hearts.

The distinction between speaking out and remaining silent is among the more prevalent pains that I've heard from our community members this week; the silence of so many of the institutions that we turn to for leadership and support—workplaces, schools, universities, community organizations.

Silence—the spurious adherence to the illusion of neutrality—comes at an unspeakable cost. Yesterday, I watched video of an altercation in my high school, in Cherry Hill, NJ, involving kids who were dressing up as Hamas militants. The entire day went by and the school said nothing publicly. Eventually the students, Jewish and Muslim, created a joint statement affirming the values that the adult leaders failed to name.

We know all the reasons why people stay silent, and it's not reduced to the simple words, "they are evil." For the first ten years after he was liberated from Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel was silent. He later explained why: "I was afraid of language." How do we find the right words? We are all afraid of language—and for good reason. Our words create, and our words destroy. But we've learned from our history that silence, too, can destroy.

"It's complicated," we hear leaders say, of the relationship between Israel and Palestine. Well, of course it is—that is why we strive to educate ourselves *with nuance*. However, *nuance is entirely different from neutrality*.

Nuance is the opposite; it's about distinctions—the wisdom we acquire when we look closely and discern, for the sake of truth and reality. Neutrality, on the other hand, is chaos—it's *tohu vavohu*. And, as our history has shown us, it bends toward dehumanization. Neutrality is where terrorism lays its eggs.

Yesterday, it seemed like every parent who sends their kids to Jewish Day School was asked by someone – a family member or friend, "are you going to send your kids to school tomorrow?" This is not a new question for parents of Jewish kids. We heard it after 9/11, or recently, after the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre. But I can't recall them actually keeping the kids home; not until today, as I'm learning from many of my rabbinic colleagues.

We all have different voices and pains and trauma. I can't imagine being the teacher in a classroom with an Israeli and Palestinian student—*what do you say?* I hope our leaders say *something*. Don't say *nothing*!

Let me draw another distinction: rejecting neutrality doesn't mean "choosing between Israelis and Palestinians." That just promotes ignorance. Nuance is not neutrality. It's nuance that enables our values to live and thrive in public life; uncomfortable but honestly and humanly.

Few have modeled the integrity of nuance more powerfully than the President of the United States Joe Biden, when he addressed the massacres this week.

The remarks of the President of the United States need to be heard by everyone. He *named* the atrocities. He called out the bloodthirsty brutality of Hamas. He *tried*, with words, to make it impossible for the world to look-away; to look away from our infants and young ones; to look away from our elderly; to look away from us as human beings. He saw our people. And, by the way, the question whether or not my fellow progressives are comfortable with the notion of "peoplehood" is completely irrelevant when terrorists are dancing our blood. We *are* a people, and our President named that distinction when said: "for the Jewish people, [this is] not new."

It matters that we actually have a President of the United States who is not neutral. It matters that we have a President of the United States who says: “the United States stands with the people of Israel in the face of this terrorist assaults. Israel has the right to defend itself and its people. *Full stop.*”

It matters that he rejected neutrality without sacrificing nuance.

It matters that he said to the Prime Minister of Israel that Israel must follow international laws of war.

It matters that he lifted up the “Palestinian people’s right to dignity and self-determination.”

It matters that he used his voice to remind the civilized world that Hamas’ stated purpose is the annihilation of the State of Israel and the Jewish people.

It matters that he said the words “full stop.”

When we say “full stop” we are drawing a line, a distinction between one sentence and another. Between words that might otherwise seem like a chaotic pool of nothingness.

Israel has a right to defend itself—full stop.

There is no justification for terrorism—full stop.

Innocent civilians deserve to be safe, Israelis and Palestinians—full stop.

Israel and Palestine must follow international law—full stop.

Palestinians do have a right to self-determination—full stop.

Hamas must be destroyed—full stop.

Captives must be rescued—full stop.

We are in so much pain—full stop.

We need more allies—full stop.

We need each other—full stop.

One final word about separation... Therapists in our midst know quite well the power of “transference” – that is, the psychological tendency for us to redirect real, deep feelings from one person upon another—or one group upon another. We could spend hours going into the many facets of transference that are at-play in this moment.

I’d like to urge us all, myself included, to reflect on an interpersonal level. We are all vulnerable to transferring the pain or outrage or grief we’re feeling—upon those who are close to us. Or those close-ish to us; upon each other. We have experienced or inherited a tremendous amount of trauma. We’re experiencing so much right now. In times of trauma, everything can come up, all at once. It’s like a psychic and interpersonal *tohu vavohu*, a state of mind that is unable to distinguish, to separate, to connect to the power-tool of discernment that distinguishes our humanity.

This Shabbat, I pray for discernment: to know where and how to house our grief and outrage; to know where and how to speak out and say “full stop”; to know where and how to quiet our minds and listen to someone story.

[The following is transcribed]

Sermons often end with what tradition calls a *nechemta*, a closing word of comfort. Moments ago, I sat in my study thinking, what could possibly give us comfort?

Then I recalled a teaching from the Talmud. I typed it, read it aloud, and... then deleted it... because it was too “comfortable.”

Then I recalled a midrash, one about Adam, the first human being at the end of creation. I typed it, read it aloud to myself, and then deleted it...because it was too “comfortable.”

And then 6pm arrived... and I thought to myself, how will it end?

And I came in here.

I grabbed my tallit (prayer shawl) and put it on.

I remembered that—however fraught a flag might be—early Zionists, who wanted nothing more than a place for Jews to be safe, they could have chosen anything for the flag – any symbol at all. They chose the image of a tallit. They decided to make it the same dimensions as the flag of the United States of America, in beautiful alignment of its democratic aspirations.

It’s fascinating to see the distinction between the [American flag] on January 6th, 2021 – the flag of the last administration and the politicization of the flag, as if owned by one particular supremacist ideology – and what’s happened over the last few months, the Israelis on the Left who have been wrapping themselves in the Israeli flag [in pro-democracy demonstrations]. Left, Right, Center, all over, with anger, passion, disagreement: they wrap themselves in the flag; this tallit.

We wrap ourselves in this tallit....

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam

asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hitateiv b'tzitzit

(Blessed are You, God, who sanctifies us with mitzvot, commanding us to wrap ourselves in the fringes.)

Hatikiva (“The Hope” - Israel’s National Anthem)

*Kol od balevav p'nimah,
nefesh Y'hudi homiyah,
ul'faatei mizrach kadimah,
ayin l'Tziyon tzofiyah
od lo avdah tikvateinu
hatikva bat sh'not alpayim,
lihyot am chofshi b'artzeinu,
Eretz Tziyon, viY'rushalayim.*

So long as in the inmost heart of a Jewish spirit sings,
so long as the eye looks eastward, gazing toward Zion,
our hope is not lost—
the hope of two thousand years:
to be a free people in our land,
the land of Zion and Jerusalem.