

“God took the human being, Adam, and placed Adam in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. And the God commanded Adam, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.” (Gen. 2:15-17)

When news reached us of the invasion and attacks in Israel, David and I were 7 hours north of here, and about 40 minutes from the nearest town, on a reserve called Minnie Water. And remarkably, as you walk the strip of land alongside the edge of the ocean, you reach a strange little carved wooden sign that frames the view of the sea, and across the top, like where an old TV antenna would be, the sign says “Tree of Knowledge Lookout” – I guess the idea being that when you look through the signposts to the expanse in front of you, you come to *know* something a bit more than you did before you stared into the deep. Something more than you knew *before* you stared into the raging, turbulent waters lapping at the shores. But when I stared into the empty frame this week, my only thought was how little we know in the face of the deep, in the face of rage, in the face of how very enormous and how very small the world can be, all at the same time.

But then I remembered that the Tree of Knowledge described in this week’s parasha is not just a Tree of Knowledge, but Knowledge of *Tov v’Ra*, good and bad (or evil). And as I learned more with each passing day about the horrors that took place in Southern Israel, I actually felt that, yes, in the face of such an atrocity, I know a few things that are very clearly *tov* and a few things that are very clearly *ra*. What follows is a stream of consciousness that unfolded throughout the week, each time I stared through the signposts into the raging waters—a short litany of what I know, that you probably know too, but that, in articulating, we feel a solidarity so needed at this time:

- I know that whatever one’s politics, massacring entire families is evil – *ra*.
- I know that scaring people is evil – *ra*.
- I know that terror is indiscriminate – *ra*.
- I know that ideologies that sow hatred place murder over sanctity of life – *ra*.
- I know that the parents who watched their children taken hostage will not rest until they come home, will think of them every hour of their life, and will be tormented by thoughts of what might be happening to them at any given moment – *ra*.
- I know that the horrors committed are beyond what we are seeing, and that even what we are seeing is horrible – *ra*.
- I know that it is not “fighting for human rights” to kidnap and kill civilians – *ra*.
- I know that Hamas does not have the interests of their people at heart – *ra*.
- I know that many soldiers will lose their lives and many families lose loved ones in the weeks ahead – *ra*.
- I know that those fighting have lost friends and relatives and will carry grief, along with their artillery, into the battlefield – *ra*.
- I know that those not going into battle still feel scared, vulnerable, and violated – *ra*.
- I know that there are those who rejoiced in the streets and handed out sweets to celebrate the death of Jews – *ra*.
- I know that when Israel begins to defend itself, public opinion will turn against us – *ra*.

- I know that those who speak of a “measured response” have no idea the infinitude of our people’s millennia old pain and displacement – *ra*.
- I know that when we sing *od lo avda tikvateinu*—“we have not yet lost our hope”—we now sing of hope for return of hostages, hope for comfort of the bereaved, and hope for victory in war. That these words are now less about a hope never abandoned, and more about a hope never fully realised, despite all who’ve died in service to that hope – *ra*.

Those are a few things I know about the bad. But what about the good? Is there any greater clarity on what’s *Tov*, in all that has transpired?

- I know that Israelis waited hours in line to give blood – *tov*.
- I know that in Israel they had to turn blood donors away, in order to spread the abundance of goodwill over time – *tov*.
- I know that despite the division of the past months, the Israeli people are united in combatting a common enemy, more than 100%(!!) of reservists are responding to the call to duty, and a unity government has been formed to tackle the present crisis – *tov*.
- I know that those not going to war are making care packages for those who are – *tov*.
- I know that money is being raised across the diaspora to look after bereaved families and fund efforts to ease pain – *tov*.
- I know that Germans gathered in the rain and sang *HaTikvah* by a Brandenburg Gate lit up in blue and white lights – *tov*.
- I know that we here in Chatswood have received contact from elected officials, the local parish and diocese, the police area commander, our fire protection service, and a resident of Artarmon who was moved by what he heard in church about our pain – *tov*.
- I know that the Jewish communal rally in Sydney was among the largest in the world – *tov*.
- I know that in the face of evil, we have to increase kindness, and for so many in our community, that is our reflex - *tov*.

These are a few things I know about good and bad. What I don’t know is why God didn’t want us to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and bad? Is it too painful to know good from bad? Was God trying to spare humanity the pain of something God knew all along? The Torah says: “On the day you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil”. Maybe God wanted to keep us from knowing the good and bad side of humanity, and the evil we were capable of committing against one another. Maybe God thought we’d lose heart and not want to live in this world God created. This is something I still wonder.

I also wonder why God said we shouldn’t eat of the tree of eternal life, which was also in the garden. I would like to think that maybe this is because God knew we didn’t need it. That somehow, amidst all the good and bad of the world, the Jewish people would live on. That we’d live through, and live on, in spite of it all. *Am Yisrael Chai* – *tov*.