

It is possible to look at the first several weekly portions of Torah as an anguished attempt to try to deal with the problem of evil and the belief in God. If there is a Creator who brings order to the universe, why are we left to live in a world of such chaos? If God is the One who brings good, why is there so much evil?

The first Torah portion begins with murder and the searing question of Cain whose refusal to care for others echoes through the generations, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The second Torah portion, which we read last week speaks of a world gripped by violence (in an eerie echo of today, the word for unmitigated violence in Hebrew is *hamas*). God's answer to human depravity is to seek to wipe it from the face of the earth. Later in the portion where humanity gathers together in (our sages suggest) in immorality, God again seeks to destroy the evil, this time by scattering and dividing the nations. I

In all these efforts, however, even God fails. Which brings us to this week's Torah reading, which offers a final attempt to address human injustice and cruelty – by beginning with one man who will be the progenitor of a people destined to model holiness and goodness. *Lech lecha*, God tells Avram, "go to ... a place that I will show you ... and you will be a blessing." (Genesis 12:2)

Four times in this *parasha* Avram is promised the land that has been at the center of Jewish identity from this seminal moment. Our *parasha*, however, alludes to ongoing struggles. The shepherds of Avram and his nephew Lot quarrel over water and grazing. The strife between them, Avram suggests, is not the answer. Rather, the only way to live in peace is to live apart.

This week I heard an interesting discussion between two activists – one an Israeli Jew, the other a Palestinian. The Palestinian suggested establishing a single state where all would have equal rights "between the river and the sea." He offered a utopian possibility of a nation which would be like Switzerland, where people of different languages and faiths could live in harmony. The Israeli activist countered that given the history, it would much more likely resemble Yugoslavia, where internecine hatred tore its peoples asunder, neighbor killing neighbor. For now,

at least, it seems that the advice of Avram Avinu, Abraham our father makes more sense – "let us separate." (Genesis 13:9)

And yet, and yet ... for Palestinians and Israelis to fully part is also fanciful and impossible. First, because 20% of Israel's citizens are Palestinian. Second, because Israeli governments have allowed Jewish settlements to grow in the very heart of the West Bank – where Jews (hundreds of thousands) and Palestinians (millions) live cheek by jowl together. Like it or not, Zionism created two national identities – Israeli and Palestinian. We are bound together.

Even now, every three weeks after the barbaric pogrom of Hamas it is difficult to fully comprehend how much has changed. Even in the early hours of after the horrors of what was done to civilians came to light, already we heard equivocation and explanation. "Israel brought this upon itself." "This is the understandable result of oppression and colonialization." The bray of our enemies, particularly those on the political left, has offered moral clarity. When professors at elite universities say they were "exhilarated" by the torture and murder, we know that learning does not bring understanding. When pro-Palestinians protestors – just yesterday in New York City – chased terrified Jews into Cooper Union, and librarians offered to hide them in the attic from the angry mob, the well-earned trauma of the Jew forced to hide and flee rises like bile in the stomach? When our college students, or those in law schools or graduate programs, have hide that they are Jewish, or we are afraid to walk the streets of New York wearing a *magen David* or *kippa*, do we not know that those who say "I am only anti-Israel and not antisemitic" are liars?

This Shabbat is the fifth *yahrzeit* of the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh. Let us make no mistake – antisemitism is real, it is growing and it comes at us from three directions: far-right white supremacists that sees Jews as "globalists" seeking world domination, the "woke" left that delegitimizes Zionism as a Jewish people's movement of liberation and self-determination, and Islamic fundamentalists,

which views a Jewish State as affront to a Middle East that only "belongs" to Muslims.

We live in a fraught and uncertain moment – as did many generations of Jews before us. However – and this is important to bear in mind – we also live in a time about which our ancestors could have only dreamed. The State of Israel, for all its challenges and problems, offers an expression of Jewish power, even if recent weeks have stripped away a sense of invulnerability. More than that, we are blessed to live in a country that continues to be supportive of Israel and to have most politicians express abhorrence with the anti-Jewish outbreaks of recent days. A study released this week indicates that nearly 85% of respondents sided with Israel in its current war against Hamas. Just yesterday, White House deputy press secretary Andrew Bates made clear, "Delegitimizing the State of Israel while praising the Hamas terrorist murderers who burned innocent people alive, or targeting Jewish students, is the definition of unacceptable — and the definition of antisemitism."

I would be foolish to say what I think will happen in the coming days. As I once heard from times of Israel editor David Horovitz, "if anyone tells you what will happen next in the Middle East, don't believe them." No one really knows. That said, there are some things that I believe will not be the same moving forward:

- First, while no one can predict what will happen with the government in Israel, there is a nearly universal sense among Israelis that their government has failed them. Blame will come later, but the days since October 7th have shown the powerful sense of civic pride and civilian power that Israelis have. Hamas leadership may have thought that the divisiveness within Israel in recent months made Israel weak - and in some ways they were right - but the viciousness of their attacks has, for now, united Israelis and Jews.
- Second, the political assumption of many in Israel that peace could come simply through accords with other Arab countries without really dealing with the Palestinian issue, has been shown to be untenable. Whatever is about

to come next, it is hard to imagine that the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians will go back to the *status quo ante*.

- Third, as Israeli commentator Daniel Gordis wrote this week, "as grateful as Israelis truly are for American support, it is lost on few that two aircraft carriers mean that we are worried that we cannot actually defend ourselves without help, something that we were always taught would never be the case." The sense that Israel is the safest place to be a Jew was lost this month, and it is not going to be easy to determine what that means for the future.
- Fourth, in this country there has been a palpable and deep reexamination by many Jews about its connections with those in the progressive left. The silence about the acts of the Hamas terror by many on the left – if not outright celebration of it – is causing a painful realignment of many North American Jews whose values tend to be liberal. What this will mean for funding of universities, for political alliances and within the Jewish community, I don't know. But I am certain that I (and I suspect our larger Jewish community in this country) moving forward will not have the same priorities as previously.
- Finally, there is no inevitability in history. Some may think that out of this, the sides will harden, and the anguish of these days are but a precursor to darker, more dangerous days ahead. Maybe. But Torah makes clear that even if evil may not be able to be fully eradicated, we still hold a power to move, step by step, towards a better tomorrow. The shock of recent weeks reminds us that we cannot take our alliances for granted nor our security for granted. Yet out of crisis can come a realization that something has to change. After the terrible Kishinev pogrom in 1903 Zionism was no longer a discussion just among an elite few, but it became a mass movement. Out of the Holocaust came the realization among some (if certainly not all) that Jews cannot and should not rely solely on the beneficence of others.

"Never again" became a mantra for Jewish resistance, resilience, courage and power. If there was ever a time for the assertion of our pride and power, it is now. More than this, we cannot predict what this will mean for Israel in the Middle East. After 1948, Israel went to war with Egypt four times. But, almost unbelievably, former enemies established a *détente*. It may not be "peace" fully realized, but it is better than war. It is not impossible that after all of this, and with some luck, there may be an awakening among Israelis and Palestinians that – as painful as that may be for both – a change in the relationship may be the price worth it if it leads to a realignment against Iran and those they support that seek only ongoing struggle and violence.

Our *parasha* speaks of Avram coming to the land that, generations later, would be the Land of Israel, and almost immediately thereafter having to go down to Egypt. His journey reminds us that the path to redemption is not a straight one. The road to Jewish liberation has always taken many twists and turns. But we are not powerless. They are blessed to live in a generation of Jewish power. We have the gift of being in a country where we can stand up, speak out, join with allies, and defend ourselves, fellow Jews and all those – including Palestinians – who seek peace and deserve the right to determine their destiny.

What can you do?

- ☐ Join us in wear a blue ribbon in solidarity for the safe return of everyone who has been taken hostage by the terrorist group Hamas. And when people ask, "what is that?" urge them to join in the need to demand that those taken captive be returned.
- ☐ Speak to our elected officials and thank them for their continued to support for Israel.
- ☐ Demand of any university to which you are connected that they forcefully condemn the Hamas pogrom (even if far too late, better late than never) And also demand that your *alma mater* takes action to protect Jewish

students, and clarify that support of the elimination of Israel is hate speech, it is racist, and the refuge of the Jew-hater.

- Speak up and speak out – at work, school, on social media, in conversations with colleagues – about why this is war not a fight of Jew and Palestinian, this is not a religious war of Judaism and Islam, it is not about sharing the land. This is a war against Hamas - an enemy whose very charter for its existence, and which its actions of October 7 show that the goal is eradication of Israel (and another Holocaust) knows no moral bounds.
- Take one of the "We Stand with Israel" signs this evening. If you want to be courageous follow the lead of several students in the Guggenheim elementary school who had these three signs in the hallway – each with an Israeli flag – "Everyone should be included", "Everyone has different lives and don't hurt Israel", "Everyone is different." If they can be Jewish and proud – so should we. So *must* we.

My friends. Do not be afraid. *Lech lecha* – the road ahead is long, but we will be, as we have ever been "prisoners of hope". As God said to Avram:

I will make of you a great nation,  
And I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
And you shall be a blessing.  
וְאֶבְרַכְהָ מְבַרְכֶיהָ וּמְקַלְלָהָ אָאָר  
I will bless those who bless you  
And curse him that curses you;  
וְנִבְרַכְוּ בְךָ כָּל מִשְׁפָּחַת הָאֲדָמָה  
And all the families of the earth  
Shall bless themselves by you. (Genesis 12:2-3)