Call It Benefit, Call It Agony

Hillel Goldberg

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In my office is a book case about six feet wide and ten feet tall, dedicated to books on the Holocaust. I have categorized them in rough fashion: history, death camps, Nazism, Nazi doctors, church, rescue, resistance, memoirs, theological response, and big books, including picture books and timelines. These do not include more books on the subject that I keep at home. I am a student of the Holocaust. I have written at length about it, including in *TRADITION*.[1] I have always thought it my duty as a Jew to know my people's history and especially its most recent history, including the unspeakable. However, I never, ever, thought that something like the Holocaust would become part of my own life, contemporaneous; never thought I would live to witness Jews being intentionally shot, mutilated, dismembered, burned alive. I never thought I would come to understand a traumatic contemporary event of this scale as it was still unfolding when it took the world decades to do so in the wake of the Holocaust—as evidenced in the various categories of books on my shelves.

I was approximately 60 miles from that massacre when it took place, but instead of waiting years and decades to learn of its full dimension, instead of reading initially tentative, unverified reports, such as the news of gas chambers that trickled out in 1942, instead of studying the careful documentation of the Holocaust that took decades to amass, as was the case with my parents' generation, I learned more about the October 7 massacre than I ever wanted to know and in a span of time more compressed than I could bear. Some of the categories on my bookshelf emerged almost simultaneous with the war that the massacre triggered. I have before me a rough history of the planning that went into this massacre, who planned

1 "Holocaust Theology: The Survivors' Statement," Part 1 (Summer 1982), Part 2 (Winter 1982); both parts now reprinted and revised in my *Across the Expanse of Jewish Thought: From the Holocaust to Halakhah and Beyond* (Ktav, 2022).

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it and where the training of the brutes took place; I have before me chilling memoirs by a few survivors, horrific videos, a few stories of resistance and rescue, and an outpouring of response—political, literary, and theological. For all the similarities between the Holocaust and the massacre of October 7, the obvious difference in dimension, and the still more obvious difference in the capacity of the victims' nation to respond, draw a qualitative distinction between the two traumatic events. Even so, as far as my own soul and mental state are concerned, I can bear this massacre less than my indirect knowledge of the Holocaust.

Mental state: I no longer know how to answer the routine question, "How are you?" That my health may be good and all the rest in reasonably good order does not allow me to say, "I'm fine." I am not. And mental state, as we know from the biblical Joseph to the modern Freud, manifests itself not just consciously. The events of October 7 have wreaked havoc with my unconscious, which now reflects adjacencies of normality and horror, of vivid realities both disjointed and coherent. After October the Jewish people was radically changed. I sensed this painfully on October 12, when I had the first of what would be many dreams, many when I am awake. That night I dreamed:

> *I was a student in a class at The Hebrew University. It was the first day of the course and every student was supposed to come prepared to address the class. I had prepared nothing and feared I would be called on. I was not. Instead, an adult woman arose and gave an engaging lecture on the budgetary issues in running an educational institution. Near the end of her lecture she threw out a side comment that the budget of running a school today is much different from what it was for Novorodok* yeshivot *back in Poland in the 1930s. They had to provide room and board and even clothing for the impoverished students. Some students went barefoot. The budget had to cover a student's life, not just his studies.*
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> *This offhand comment triggered the recollection of another student in the class, an older gentleman, short of stature, who recalled his days in one of those* yeshivot. *He was a sweet man and the class was fascinated by his memories. Then, something happened. It was an innocent question by another student in the class, something along the lines of why had he come late to the class. He replied: "I just lost five of my family members in the*

Simhat Torah massacre – my wife, and four children; one, a baby; then, a child; then, a Bar Mitzva age child; then, an older child of marriageable age." I was stunned and overwhelmed. How could this man have suffered such an utter, incalculable loss and then spoken sweetly to this class? I fell on him in tears. I was weeping and weeping, distraught.

End of dream. It was 1 a.m. As the Talmud says, every dream contains a degree of nonsense, but it remains impossible to extract the dream's point other than through its context. My longest period of residence in Israel was when I taught at The Hebrew University. My major focus of research then was on the Novorodok school of *musar*. Both segments framed the horror infiltrating my mind, no doubt accentuated by the many stories of suffering I have accumulated of Novorodok students in concentration camps or in Siberia during World War II.

And so, I am now part of a post-October 7 people that has experienced a drastic intensification of its history of suffering and rebuilding, the two now tightly compressed without (call it benefit, call it agony) the time to frame it. But this much I grasp, and in this I believe I share in the mental state of my people: I am now part of a people that is widely condemned for defending itself even as it was widely disparaged for failing to defend itself in the Holocaust. After October 7, we live with these and other, parallel adjacencies, all visceral, grounded in our new world that oscillates between solidarity and hatred. The question is, which will predominate?

Clearly, the defense of the massacre and mutilation of October 7 is a dangerous signal not just for the Jews and Israel, but for humanity. It is worth remembering that not just Jews died by the millions in World War II. At the same time, I am not certain how representative the visible spike in antisemitism is. I am stopped by strangers in the parking lot of the local supermarket back home in Denver, who tell me they stand with Israel. I am called by non-Jewish friends and acquaintances—the insurance agent, the newspaper printer, the neighbor in the building in which we office, etc.—to express support for Israel. I report in the *Intermountain Jewish News* on the chancellor of the University of Denver, who cannot bring himself to condemn the massacre (while condemning Putin's invasion of Ukraine), but I also report on the chancellor of Colorado Christian University, who is holding an entire evening of solidary with Israel. I make a mental note that the local rally in support of Israel drew roughly 10 times the number of

people as the local anti-Israel rally. So I remain unclear as to how the balance between hatred and solidarity will ultimately fall.

I made reference above to the contemporaneous theological response to October 7. It is of course also too early to tell how this will ultimately fall, but I am distressed that there is any response at all by this early point. *Hazal* said of the destruction of the Second Temple, "On account of our sins we were banished from the Land," but it took roughly a century for this to be formulated. In between was, predominantly, silence.[2] I now read in various places and hear from various friends that we should understand that whenever Jews suffer, God means it for the best. I am astounded at how freely this is set forth by Jews who dwell in security at a distance from Israel who are not numbered among the current sufferers! What a sufferer himself might immediately devise by way of explanation (if anything) is reserved for the sufferer himself. Still more, I wonder what kind of *emuna* it is that must have an instant answer to horrendous, utterly shocking brutality—*slaughter of children in cribs! dismemberments! kidnappings!*—otherwise, the faith falters. The only contemporaneous theological response to October 7 that I find appropriate is silence, and the only spiritual response that drives me forward is, besides my personal *tefillot*, the *Avinu Malkeinu* and Psalms that now punctuate our prayers.

2 This point was formulated by Nahum Glatzer, as suggested by Alexander Altmann in his "Nahum N. Glatzer: The Man and His Work," *Judaism* 12:2 (Spring 1963), 195–202. Altmann summarized Glatzer thus:

> [The Tannaites'] answer to the catastrophe of the year 70 was a searching for evidences of a Divine plan in those earlier stretches of history which had been depicted in Biblical historiography, and which Ezra the Scribe had invoked when reconstituting Judaism. The fact that the Tannaites discontinued the writing of history was not due, as had been suggested by some modern Jewish historians, to psychological reasons but was the direct and necessary result of the situation encountered and the Tannaite reaction to it: the Rabbis were silent on the history of their day precisely because they believed in the God of history Whose acts were now impenetrable to human understanding. Their very silence was eloquent testimony to their faith.

War in Israel, in New Haven

Alex S. Ozar

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October 25, 2023, Yale University. Avital, an Israeli law student whose husband flew back immediately after Simhat Torah, tells me that while she knows it would be best for the country if the ground operation got underway, she can't help but be grateful for every day it is delayed further. There was a student "walk-out" on campus recently, featuring calls to end the occupation and signs with "from the river to the sea" in bold red and green. Netanel, a spiritually-enterprising undergrad from Vermont, put on his *tefillin*, draped a *tallit*-sized Israeli flag over his shoulders, and loudly sang *Am Yisrael Chai* on repeat at the center of the demonstration; one of the pro-Israel groups advertised a place of refuge with free lunch in the Hillel cafeteria; most students simply went about their day.

I feel a strange guilt writing about our experiences here in New Haven. My colleagues in Israel are doing staggering work providing vital material care for the displaced, for those grieving, for soldiers. The hostages are still hostages. Avital's husband is anxiously awaiting orders, as is Aaron's brother, as are Yehuda and Ben, and on and on. We are preoccupied with waging a war of flyers and statements and resolutions and juvenile demonstrations. But if the work of Jewish community and *avodat Hashem* we do here on campus matters ever, then it surely matters now.

I first heard the news on Shemini Atzeret morning. As I walk into the Hillel for davening, Mitchell—a regular at our *minyan* but not *shomer Shabbat*—intercepts me. There was an incursion from Gaza, he tells me. About 90–100 people have been killed, along with hundreds wounded and several dozen taken hostage. The numbers are too staggering to process, I don't believe him, he must have misspoken. But he insists it's true, and it begins to sink in. My Hillel colleague

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Jason has come over, as has my wife and JLIC co-director Lauren. We are late for davening and huddle briefly. Presumably we have no choice but to tell everyone the news, Shabbat and Yom Tov notwithstanding. But I still don't know what to do. It's Shabbat and Yom Tov, and I shouldn't even know this information.

I enter the *shul* in a daze. I desperately wish I could text our JLIC staff WhatsApp to ask how everyone else is handling this situation. Instead, grasping for a reference in the back of my head, I wander upstairs to the *beit midrash* and pull out a Rambam, *Hilkhot Ta'aniot*. I find the reference:

> We do not impose a fast upon the community on either Shabbat or Yom Tov, and so too we do not sound either the shofar or the trumpets, and we do not cry out and supplicate in prayer, unless there is a city under siege by idolaters . . . even if there is a single individual being pursued by idolaters, bandits, or a wicked spirit, we cry out and supplicate in prayer for them (1:6).

This crystallizes the responsibility of the moment for me. Following Hallel, I go up to the podium. Everyone sits. I try, but I cannot speak. I try again and get the words out in a low and broken voice. Incursion, large number of casualties, many wounded, hostages. In the left part of my visual field I see Eytan, sophomore and gabbai, leap from his seat and burst into tears, and on the left I see Sara, mother visiting from Israel, gasp in shock. *Where*?, someone shouts, and I don't know if I forgot to say this was in Israel or if they were asking which region. In any case I am now aware that my shaking voice had been only barely audible. David, another visiting parent with family in Israel, has heard from his family and provides everyone a fuller briefing. I share the Rambam I'd retrieved, we recite *Tehillim*, and then proceed with davening as usual. I reference the tragedy again before Yizkor, and following davening I say that while I quite honestly have no idea what the rest of Yom Tov will look like, I am confident that we will figure out the right way forward together.

Along with Lauren and Jason, we convene a group of student leaders. Simhat Torah on campus is usually particularly joyous, with the crescendo of a raucous parade around campus with the *sifrei Torah*. It becomes clear this cannot happen, both because we simply could not celebrate so freely under the circumstances, and because, as one student pointed out, the external optics would look quite bad. We settle on muted indoor *hakkafot*, punctuated by some slow

singing, and then, in place of the traditional parade, a gathering as a community to process and simply be together.

There are students at that gathering that night I rarely ever see in the building, and students I have never seen before at all. We share some *divrei Torah* and reflections. One student says he spent hours that afternoon in bed on his phone, looking at images he regrets seeing, and seeing social media reactions his conscience cannot comprehend. There are so many tears. Afterwards, Mitchell tells me he is jealous of me, because I have not been able to see the videos yet. The truth is, weeks later I still have not. I have never experienced a Yom Tov so difficult, and I have never been more grateful for Yom Tov.

There is a vigil in front of the library on Monday night. The senior rabbi and the executive director of the Hillel speak, as do two students, one of them Roi, an Israeli whose childhood friend and tennis nemesis, now an officer, was killed leading his soldiers into the fray. The president of the university, incidentally of Soloveitchik pedigree, stands toward the back along with other university dignitaries; his statement would be posted online a day later. There are about 350 people at the vigil, including several recent alumni who returned from New York to be with what is still their community. After the speeches, everyone locks arms and sings for 30–40 minutes. It is piercingly beautiful, and I wonder what people watching from their dorm rooms are thinking. We retreat back to the Hillel building, now boasting two patrol cars out front, and multiple Yale security and police officers, 24/7.

Yale is not the most politically kinetic campus in general, and anti-Israel activism, while certainly present, has been relatively mild. Certainly no one has ever felt physically threatened. But there is a regnant political orthodoxy, and students all know it. For most, this means that Israel is simply a topic to be avoided, lest one say the wrong thing.

As that first week wore on, I began to hear a new note of pain in addition to the initial grief. There were good stories, too: The professor who took the student aside to ask how he was holding up, the non-Jewish suitemate who showed up at the vigil. But for so many, the experience was learning that their friends were not in fact their friends. Some posted celebrations on social media, some invited their classmates to go to the pro-Hamas rally on the New Haven Green. Some simply never asked why their Jewish friend or roommate was crying, precisely because they already knew the answer.

Some engaged superficially but could not bring themselves to express solidarity or sympathy. They know the whole thing is too political, and who are they to judge who is really right. *But they murdered babies*, our students implore, *and even if you don't feel you know enough on your own, can't you trust me*? But all they get are deaf ears. *I don't care where, but I need to be somewhere with Jews right now*, I overhear a student saying one of those first nights. I met more students in the Hillel that one week than I normally would over the course of a semester. They may have never been there before, and, to be honest, I don't know that many will come back. But that week, they couldn't be anywhere else.

No one attends Yale strictly for the education. There is an extraordinary wealth of interesting, dynamic, brilliant peers, clubs, affinity groups, and even those of our students who learn Torah for hours each day and would never go to a frat party cannot resist the draw of participation in the broader Yale community. Yalies are *Yalies*. Or so our Jewish students thought; allowed themselves to think. An illusion has been shattered, and it hurts. One student who I've only ever known peripherally came to find me and cried for an hour because her group of friends at Yale, people she's been there for and bared her soul to for three years, simply refused to join her in her grief, and now she doesn't know how she'll survive the rest of her time here. I heard versions of this story over and over and over.

And then there is the one American Studies professor tweeting in support of Hamas, and the statistics TA who sends out a group text inviting everyone to the pro-Hamas rally. *This person is in charge of my grade*, a student says to me. There are the daily op-eds in the school newspaper, and there's a university administration that, at every turn, under the banner of high-minded principles, seems distinctively reluctant to offer support to one minority group in particular.

A part of me is glad, relieved, that our students are realizing how the world works, and who their friends really are. I was raised being told that I always had to have my passport up to date, and I came to Yale as a grad student with a life established elsewhere and a modicum of world experience behind me. I have only ever had low expectations and so have only ever been surprised positively. But we have raised a generation that genuinely believes they can and should be a part of, enjoy and contribute to, the best that contemporary America has to offer. They have in fact never encountered any friction on this score, and they take this to be simply their right.

Indeed, it is their right, and I have been inspired by their refusal to relinquish or compromise on their claim to it. But now they know that the cards are not always stacked in their favor, and they will not always win. That is hard, and one role I have here is to help them mourn what they've lost and turn toward the future with clear eyes. Our community can do more to prepare our children for reality. They can still go to Yale, and in my view there is still much to gain here, intellectually and spiritually. But they need to be prepared to carry on as an occasionally inconvenient minority.

I expect that for most students, life will more or less go back to normal. Even those who were hurt and shocked will eventually revert to their old patterns; many already have. I am receiving the same steady pulse of outreach from new applicants this admissions cycle, and generally I would be surprised were Modern Orthodox enrollment at the Ivies to decrease. The basic incentives and social forces drawing students here are no less powerful, and our community is fundamentally OK. But it won't ever be the same. An innocence and intimacy has been lost. I am hopeful that closeness and safety that students discovered through their crisis-mode instinct to huddle with the Jewish community will stay with them. They know now, far more and more deeply than before, that they are Jews before they are Yalies.

We were away for Yale's brief fall break, and at this point students have been forced by the tyranny of grades to buckle down and focus on their neglected schoolwork. There are no more vigils or demonstrations, and the numbers in the Hillel building have reverted to pre-October 7th levels. Our *minyan*, where we continue to recite *Avinu Malkeinu* and *Tehillim* daily, has likewise come down from the swell we experienced that first week. Life keeps moving. This is itself a source of pain and confusion. Especially, though very much not only, for the Israelis on campus, the idea of normalcy is intolerable.

For the Israelis, too, the kinds of tactical twisting and maneuvering even sympathetic campus professionals feel compelled to employ is foreign and presumptively offensive. A note from our Hillel (which I had a hand in crafting) condemned a "death to Palestinians" sign with accompanying Israeli curse words that appeared in one of the dorms. We felt it was both the right thing to do and strategically smart to disavow such a thing. (Had any of the Muslim groups said anything about the signs calling for Intifada?) But for the Israelis it was a profound betrayal of their safety. When you are at war, you

simply do not provide your enemy with ammunition. Some of the Israelis have begun carrying pepper spray. I find this ridiculous, but I know that it is a product of what they see with a visceral clarity and I do not: that the difference between Hamas and the *narishkeit* we deal with on campus is only one of degree.

I don't know what the coming weeks will bring. The ground invasion will start, and campus consensus will swing further and further toward solidarity with the structurally weaker pole of the power differential. The broader Jewish community will itself suffer painful fracture and disorientation, both on the level of political tactics and deep convictions. Firebrands on the right and left will rally the likeminded in ways that alienate others, and at the same time reluctance from all sides to cause offense or risk breaking the fragile solidarity will leave much unsaid and many feeling their political selves are unwelcome. There will be more rallies, more chants for Palestine to be free from the river to the sea, more statements and petitions. But in some ways what will be even harder to suffer will be the silence and disinterest of the majority. Avital will put her two-year-old to bed knowing her husband is in harm's way. Maybe Julie, a first-year on nine-month leave from the IDF, will finally get the call-up she's been so desperate for. More people our community knows and loves will die defending Israel from a barbaric enemy. And our students are supposed to just keep going to class and turning in their P-sets, smiling at their non-Jewish suitemate as they run to their room to cry alone.

My deepest hope, though, for our little community here in New Haven, geographically a world away from our hearts' focus, is that we will continue to cry, and *daven*, together.

Psalms for a State of Vertigo

Bacol Serlui

Bacol Serlui, an Israeli poet, literary critic, and teacher of Hebrew literature, is the recipient of the 2022 Yehuda Amichai Prize.

The first night of my life when I heard a siren, I almost died of fright. I was eight years old and the Gulf War woke us up and out of bed. My mother placed gas masks on my brother and me, laid us down in our sealed room, and opened a small green book. I was in second grade and already knew how to read. A scrap of gray paper contained random numbers: 20, 121, 130. From the green book she read aloud verse by verse and we, small and frightened, answered after her. It was the first time I recited the Psalms.

I remember the words: ancient, strange, beautiful. I did not understand and yet I understood: "From the depths I called you, O Lord," "I will lift up my eyes to the mountains, from whence will my help come?" In my mind's eye I saw a man standing in the dark in front of towering mountains, his soul possessed by darkness and fear. I was still frightened, but I knew that in this book there was someone who was just as scared as I was. Months later at school we read Psalm 27: "The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid when evildoers draw near to devour my flesh?" I didn't understand the meaning of the word evildoer, but I felt the visceral terror of a person pursued by those coming to eat his flesh. I understood that *Tehillim* is a book written through great terror, communicating that fear and discussing it.

Poetry is a wonderful thing. From within a personal and private experience, a poet writes and his words reach the other side of the world, to another soul in another place and time. But the phenomenon called "*Tehillim*," written about 3,300 years ago, has no equal in literature. There is even older poetry than it; known to us from the ancient epics such as Gilgamesh in Mesopotamia, the Indian Ramayana, the Greek Iliad and Odyssey—all still read to this day as ancient, wonderful works that reveal important spiritual and psychological foundations of human existence. But the intimate

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phenomenon of reading age-old *mizmorim*, in which a person in distress reaches out to a book written thousands of years before he was born and finds in it a contemporary outlet for his soul is unique in human culture. And these wondrous words were written in our own spoken language, Hebrew. Language is a dynamic, rapidly changing space, and the language of poetry often becomes obsolete within decades. Most English speakers today have difficulty reading Shakespeare, distant from them by only about 500 years. Hebrew's resurrection as a spoken language, a miracle in itself, kept the Bible accessible and close. The Book of Psalms is accessible to us because we speak its language, Hebrew, which has changed but little.

But not only in Hebrew. When the Iron Curtain collapsed in Poland, the Nobel Prize-winning poet *Czesław Miłosz* translated the Psalms into Polish. In a short time, the book became an unprecedented bestseller and sold over a million copies. After the brutal desolation of the communist spiritual oppression, a tremendous thirst for simple religious speech arose. What is it in this ancient book that touches people like that?

Today, in the Autumn of 2023, as evening falls, darkness rises in the soul. I am afraid and worried about my people, my dear ones. I struggle with every breath. I feel as if my soul is in a state of vertigo—for a moment hopeful, for a moment sorrowful; a moment of trust, a moment of anxiety. Late at night, I open my *Tehillim* to Psalm 69:

> For the lead player, on *shoshanim*, for David.
> Rescue me, God, for the waters have come up to my neck.
> I have sunk in the mire of the deep, and there is no place to stand.
> I have entered the watery depths, and the current has swept me away.
> I am exhausted from my calling out.
> My throat is hoarse.
> My eyes fail from hoping for my God.

And King David reaches out to me, the hand of a drowning man who plucks me from my whirlwind. The psalmist is perhaps the most honest person who ever walked the earth, and no human emotion is alien to him. He is known as a man of war but first and foremost he is a man of truth, voicing the fear, the terrifying feeling of suffocation, the drowning. The helplessness and distress in the face of the force of the repeated and unanswered request, in the face of the enemy at the gate seeking to take his soul. I read and re-read of the drowning

David. Unlike other psalms which stipulate a time or event—"He fled before Absalom his son" or "He altered his good sense before Abimelech"—it is not known when this psalm was written. What caused this distress? A time of war and persecution, or maybe just the turmoil of the soul, the persecution of his own soul? I don't know, but I feel he expresses the depth of my own distress.

Psalms are the weapon of the weak, of the powerless in the face of words. When I am full of gratitude, full of joy and doubt and sorrow, the ancient words come to me. They are such an intimate part of my inner language that I cannot imagine my life without them. They resonate with me and are relevant in ways I could not imagine. Reciting *Tehillim* at this time, during the current events in Israel, reveals to me how much of a warrior King David was, and how many of the psalms were written in the storm of battle. Towards the end of the book, *mizmor* 140 stuns me:

> Free me, Lord, from evil folk, from a violent man (מאיש חמסים) preserve me.
> Who plot evil in their heart, each day stir up battles.
> They sharpen their tongue like a serpent, venom of spiders beneath their lips. *Selah*.
> Guard me, Lord, from the wicked man's hands, from the violent man preserve me, who plots to trip up my steps.
> The haughty laid down a trap for me, and with cords they spread out a net.
> Alongside the path they set snares for me. *Selah.*
> I said to the Lord, "My God and You. Hearken, O Lord, to the sound of my pleas."
> Lord, Master, my rescuing strength, You sheltered my head on the day of the fray.
> Do not grant, O Lord, the desires of the wicked, do not fulfill his devising.
> They would rise. *Selah.*
> May the mischief of their own lips cover the heads of those who come round me.
> May He rain coals of fire upon them, make the violent evil man be trapped in pitfalls.
> I know that the Lord will take up the cause of the lowly, the case of the needy.
> Yes, the righteous will acclaim Your name, the upright will dwell in Your presence.

This psalm, written thousands of years ago, seems to predict the horrors of these days. I find that the strongest expression of evil in the eyes of the poet is "People of Hamas" (the evil violent folk), and he repeats this throughout the book. But the images in this chapter are so intense that they are read as our reality: the people of Hamas *are* evil schemers who lay traps and mines to overthrow righteous people with their tricks. The poet begs God to save us from them, to put a shield over his head as protection. I think of Simhat Torah when this prayer took on an existential, terrible meaning. David begs that his enemies will fall into ravines—the obstacles and pits and tunnels that they themselves have dug. And in the midst of this terrible reality, King David sends me a beautiful verse of strengthening and justifying the judgment: "I know that the Lord will take up the cause of the lowly, the case of the needy." Even when the worst of all happens, God's judgments are justice, and He demands the favorable judgment of the righteous. And I think of King David as a warrior, as a poet, as a great believer, a man who does not place his trust only in his military might but in something greater and more powerful than him, even when He is not revealed and when His judgments seem unbearably difficult, just as they do at this moment. This is how King David gained eternal life—not only as a king and a warrior but as a poet. His most personal prayer is also my prayer.

I turn to another beloved psalm, chapter 13:

> To the lead player, a David psalm.
> How long, O Lord, will You forget me forever? How long hide Your face from me?
> How long shall I cast about for counsel, sorrow in my heart all day? How long will my enemy loom over me?
> Look upon me, answer me, Lord, my God. Light up my eyes, lest I sleep death, lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes exult when I stumble.
> But I in Your kindness do trust, my heart exults in Your rescue.
> Let me sing to the Lord, for He has mercy on me.

Poets search for words, but great believers have the ability to say unbelievable things. Only the most faithful can turn to God in this way, calling out the cry of abandonment and loneliness: "How long, O Lord, will You forget me forever?" I feel abandoned, abandoned forever, at a loss, troubled day and night, haunted. And the wonderful recurring phrase "How long?"—until when and where will he shout his loneliness, his despair, his loss of power? He writes his

own soul: the wounded, the frightened, the trembling. Here comes the terrible cry for help, repeated countless times in the book: "Look upon me, answer me!" Look at me, look at my distress, *answer me!*—perhaps the most desperate human request of man to his Creator. And what a terrible darkness in the soul, facing the joy of his enemies, facing the danger of death.

And out of dark terror is also born a deep sense of security. This is one of the marvelous phenomena in the Psalms. The very same chapter contains a desperate cry of loneliness and despair, and a few verses later a complete reversal of feeling. "But I in Your kindness do trust, my heart exults in Your rescue. Let me sing to the Lord, for He has mercy on me." For years I have wondered about this turn-about that so characterizes the book—how is it that over four short verses the poet goes from the terror of death and a sense of abandonment to complete security in God's grace? It was only years later that I realized that the shouting out itself gives rise to the faith and trust and confidence. Like a baby whose mother brings him into the world with a terrible cry of pain, a terrible cry that leaves the soul clear and pure—the cry is part of the process of escaping the panic of the strait. After the praying poet gives a roaring voice to the depths of his soul, the awareness of salvation is born within him. This is how the Psalms teach us the work of prayer from that time to the present day—a personal cry in a private language for every pain to the exhaustion of the soul, from which we can exit the strait.

This escape from the strait is not only for the individual. Leo Tolstoy writes in one of his letters that the deeper one goes into the human soul, the more universal things he will discover. Sometimes it seems to me that the deeper we go into the human soul, the more we arrive at the Psalms, to the most primordial encounter between man and God in moments of joy and sorrow. David writes in Psalm 119: "I shall acclaim You with an honest heart as I learn Your righteous laws." Like all good poetry, Psalms is an amazing work of literary art that teaches inspired readers and writers how to create, or in other words, how to pray. To arrive with an honest heart and hence the path to thanksgiving and recognition of the Creator's righteous judgments.

And back to these days. At noon on that dark Shabbat of the holiday of Simhat Torah, one of our sons went off to war. I almost died of fear, trembling, and sorrow for the little we knew, from worrying about him and others. And what does a person do when he has no

way out? He cries and screams his way through. And like my mother and all the other women, I sat with my *Tehillim*, reciting from beginning to end until the close of the holiday, until my tears dried up and the breaking news broke me once again. I recite the Psalms again and again and feel that the *Tehillim* are reading me, dubbing my fear and sorrow, giving me a voice. Three millennia ago a Jew sat and poured out the agony of his soul in times of peace and war, and here he reaches out a hand of prayer and speaks to our own day, until we will be redeemed.

– Translated by Jeffrey Saks

Should the People Fail

Chaim Strauchler

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> For too long I have played on the stage of lucidity, and I have lost. Now I need to accustom my eyes to the falling darkness. I need to contemplate the natural slumber of all things, which the light calls forth, yet also causes to tire. Life must begin in darkness. Its powers of germination lie hidden. Every day has its night, every light has its shadow. I cannot be asked to accept these shadows gladly. It is enough that I accept them.
>
> —— Mihail Sebastian, *For Two Thousand Years*

Iosif Mendel Hechter came of age in Romania between the First and Second World Wars. In his book, *For Two Thousand Years*, he mercilessly dissected the anti-Semitism he experienced as a university student. Writing under the penname Mihail Sebastian, he questioned the impact of prejudice upon the victim and uncovered the injustice of facing this question itself. Ninety years later, we must do the same.

Maimonides' Demand

"That's it. That's all you're doing?"

These days, you are supposed to say *Tehillim* at the end of davening. How often do you forget? Forget *Tehillim*, forget the war, forget that 1,200 were murdered not three months ago, forget the worst antisemitic attack since the Holocaust? You would like to ignore the rising tide of hatred. You'd like to believe that things will all go back to the way they were.

And when you cannot forget these things, *Tehillim* certainly do help. They help in a way that a secular person cannot understand. They connect you to the tragedies of history. They connect you to David's fears and his strength. When you consider the darkness, you need this strength.

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And amidst *Tehillim*'s strength, amidst the symbolic and substantive acts of support for our people, we inhabit a state of ultimate powerlessness, shock, weakness, and discomfort. We live life with a gray film that covers everything—as we just feel overwhelmed by the world's hatred.

Maimonides writes:

> Should the people fail to cry out [to God] and sound the trumpets, and instead say, "What has happened to us is merely a natural phenomenon and this difficulty is merely a chance occurrence," this is a cruel conception of things, which causes them to remain attached to their wicked deeds. Thus, this time of distress will lead to further distresses (*Hilkhot Ta'aniyot* 1:3).

October 7 was a day of terrible failure: intelligence, political, and military failure. After the war, Israel will conduct investigations into its causes, hold those responsible to account, and implement new procedures to avoid future failures. This process of review and examination reflects a philosophy. We are capable of avoiding mistakes. We can improve. Accountability ultimately empowers. This is true not just on a national level but also on a communal and personal level; not just for political life but for religious life, as well.

In taking personal and communal responsibility for our destiny, we create even more discomfort. We blame the victim, specifically when we have met the victim and he is us. We insert a bias into the human effort of sense making. Tragedy is not inevitable. An all-powerful God does not bear responsibility. An all-powerful God asks that we change ourselves in order to change His world.

For Maimonides, our lives are not natural phenomena, empty of meaning. To truly cry out to God is to appreciate Divine purpose within the seemingly chance and mundane of the everyday. When we face national calamity, we must ask, "Why did we fail?" Burying one's head in the sand– or just scrolling along while disregarding the problem – might feel most compassionate. After all, examination raises uncomfortable questions. Yet, Maimonides writes to ignore our mistakes is ultimately cruel. To spare the rod of introspection is to spoil the soul of will.

Maimonides demands that we ask, "Why did October 7 happen?"

I submit it was not so that we would recite Psalm 79 and 83 with more passion or fund barbeques at army bases. Repentance is taking something that you thought was true and recognizing that you have

been deluding yourself. We all must ask ourselves, "What was it that we were wrong about on October 6?"

What follows is one Jew's attempt to answer what he was wrong about on October 6. It is not exhaustive—he was probably wrong about many other things including things that are more personal and far less national. He offers three points of error as he sees them, trying to cast a small light from within the darkness.

A Counter-Narrative to the Oppressor and Oppressed

"The world is only the oppressed and the oppressor. There is only one story. The oppressor oppresses the oppressed. The only morality is when the oppressed destroys the oppressor," so say our enemies.

Those enemies do not just threaten us physically; they pose an ideological threat. They offer a vision of the world that will attempt to subjugate, if not murder, us. Innocents are being tortured by ideas permeating Harvard, City College, and university campuses worldwide.

The intellectual groundwork for the horrific crimes of October 7 and for crimes that are yet to be committed was laid long ago. Hamas, Al-Qaeda, ISIS—by these names or others—are coming for us. Jews are once again somehow "less." And this for two reasons: Less because we are, in the enemy's eye, *infidels*. Less because we are somehow *oppressors*.

Infidels: Radical Islamism will not stop at Sderot and Kibbutz Be'eri. It is not just the Jew who is less—it is all non-Muslims.

Oppressors: Those who split the world between Oppressor and Oppressed come with a simple idea. The oppressor can do no right. The oppressed can do no wrong. All is permitted—everything—to end oppression: murder, rape, beheadings, desecrations. 240 mothers, fathers, men, women, children and babies held captive are less. They are "less" because they are Jews. Long after this military battle in Gaza has ended, we will still have a battle of ideas to fight. Unfortunately, we are losing that intellectual battle. We cannot win the battle of ideas—unless we can offer an alternative to their story.

That story is the American story. That story is Israel's story. All people have inalienable rights. We are all equal before the law. We judge one another by the content of our character and not by the color of our skin. We work together for a common good where everyone has a fair chance at a good life. History is moving to a place where these values are lived by all humanity. At times, we have fallen and we will fall short on our journey—but when we fall

we will get up and continue our work toward a more-perfect world of justice and righteousness, love and kindness.

On October 6, we discounted the "oppressor and oppressed" narrative. We naively thought that our story about common humanity working together for a common good was invulnerable. After October 7, we recognize that we must confront the "oppressor and oppressed" narrative wherever it is found. We must contain it by forcefully offering and defending our common-humanity narrative—advocating and implementing policies that create the justice and fairness that it demands. This must take place in school, in university, in media, and in government contexts.

We must not see these challenges of Jewish survival as a curse. This moment blesses the Jewish people with a chance to exhibit moral and political leadership. George Kennan wrote of a similar challenge of ideas in plotting what would become the United States' approach to the Cold War:

> [T]he thoughtful observer of Russian-American relations will find no cause for complaint in the Kremlin's challenge to American society. He will rather experience a certain gratitude to a Providence which, by providing the American people with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.[1]

As Jews, this implacable challenge of renewed antisemitism should prompt similar gratitude to God. Our moment of moral and political leadership has arrived. Let us pull ourselves together and embrace it.

Zionism Renewed

Some early Zionist thinkers believed that a Jewish state would end antisemitism. They saw the continued existence as an exilic community, as a minority within host cultures, as the problem itself, and antisemitism as a natural outcome of that inherently flawed, non-sovereign Jewish existence. Leon Pinsker's "Auto-Emancipation" used the metaphor of the dead walking among the living, "The Ghostlike apparition of a living corpse, of a people without unity or organization, without land or other bonds of unity, no longer alive,

1 George Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* (July 1947), 868.

and yet walking among the living . . . could but strangely affect the imagination of the nations." Therefore, they argued, a national return to statehood would ameliorate this problem.

This did not happen. The utopian vision fell short. The establishment of the State of Israel did not vanquish Jew-hatred in the hearts of our enemies.

Acknowledging the failure of Zionism to end antisemitism raises a new question for every Jew. What should be the pragmatic response to an ongoing reality in which our nation and our people are hated? Mihail Sebastian's question is renewed. Two primary options present themselves, anti-Zionist and Zionist.

The anti-Zionist option takes two quasi-mystical forms. The first was popular before 1948 and retains currency in some corners of the Haredi world. This anti-Zionist form sees fulfillment of ritual obligations divorced from worldly concerns as both necessary and sufficient for Jewish survival and flourishing. The second anti-Zionist form sees Jewish survival as connected to general human flourishing in Marxist or other utopian forms. Jews divested of national aspirations will somehow find safety and prosperity amidst an imagined universal well-being.

The second option is Zionist. A renewed-Zionist option would develop and deploy Jewish powers to protect the Jewish people's interests. In contrast to the messianic belief of early Zionist thinkers, renewed-Zionists would confess the permanence of antisemitism and the need to constantly defend against it. Such a Zionist approach would recognize the ever-deepening shadows of which Sebastian wrote. It would face antisemitism by asking where are the weaknesses in systems of Jewish self-defense in Israel and around the world.

A renewed Zionist must put aside worries about marginal tax rates and prioritize one worry, "Where will I be most safe?" A Zionist must consider this question in terms of the experiences of Jewish ancestors who preceded him or her and those descendants born and unborn who will follow. A Zionist must think of the safety of Jews everywhere. Where are they most likely to survive and thrive? In this moment, a cold analysis of the health of democratic societies is required: How will civil liberties be protected amidst a representative system, which will contain populations with entrenched antisemitism who will unabashedly ask their elected representatives to implement that antisemitism? For many, the answer must be *aliya*.

Yet, physical presence in Israel does not fully resolve this problem. The fact that the worst antisemitic attack since the Holocaust took

place in Israel speaks to the complexity of this challenge. Living within a Jewish society surrounded with likeminded Jews creates a feeling of security. There is safety in not getting shot; there is also safety in being surrounded by people who care when you get shot. Distance may hide antisemitism, but external threats create the same or more risk as they do outside Israel. A pragmatist responsible for Jewish survival must ask where each individual Jew is most likely to survive. That pragmatist must also ask where to strategically place Jews so that they may advocate for their people's survival and in their personal survival ensure the same for their people.

Before October 6, we thought that large-scale modern antisemitism was outdated. We believed that Western society had integrated the lessons of the Holocaust and would not allow a threat to Jewish survival to materialize. After October 7, we recognize the need to confront the "world's oldest hatred" that threatens both Israel's and Jewish existence. That recognition obligates us to live differently from our neighbors – like "strangers and sojourners" in all lands including our own.

Peoplehood

On October 6, Israeli society was riven by the judicial reform debate. On October 7, Israeli society unified in common defense against Hamas.

Many have noted this correlation and have argued for some form of causation. Our enemies sought to capitalize upon our division. As recorded in the Talmud, God once again punished us for our senseless hatred of one another.[2]

Yet, each person must ask, "What does unity demand of me?" If unity means everyone should now change his or her position to align with the position that I held on October 6, is that really unity? In following Maimonides call for examination, how must my position change because of this calamity?

We seek one another in these moments. Acculturated Jews discover that people they thought of as friends harbor antisemitic sentiments. In recognizing the weakness of such "friendship," we all seek the security of family. To borrow from Joseph, "I seek my brothers." Jews in Israel and around the world search for brothers and sisters in renewed appreciation for our common destiny.[3]

2 *Gittin* 56a

3 In employing Joseph's well-known phrase of renewed family bonds, we must acknowledge the next step in the story. Joseph's brothers accost him, throw him into a pit, and sell him into slavery.

War puts small disputes into perspective. In this season of brother and sisterhood, we can overcome petty disputes of the past that have been allowed to fester. We can also acknowledge our common suffering and reach out to Jews of various levels of Jewish affiliation in a non-judgmental way. We can invite others to share their pain with us by sharing with them the pain that we feel.

Yet, a deeper question remains. Why was Israeli society so susceptible to such irresponsible politics of division? Why could no compromise be found? Perhaps, each of us as Jews has lost some sense of responsibility for the whole. We become enchanted by our individual selves and become just a bit more uncompromising. This phenomenon is manifest in dissolution of families and of communities. We all become just a little bit more narcissistic, as individuals and as parts of self-serving groups. We become lost in what philosopher Charles Taylor called our "buffered self," which takes shape in religious forms of ever more homogenous religious communities and mutually reinforcing extremism. Institutional pressures that once forced compromise and diversity no longer hold when those institutions falter.

Immediately after Aaron's death, the Torah describes how the Canaanite king of Arad attacked the Jewish people and took captives. Rashi explains that he heard of Aaron's death and the disappearance of the clouds of honor from the camp. Appreciating Aaron's legacy as the quintessential pursuer of peace (*Avot* 1:12), we might expect that his death would precipitate unmediated internal conflict making the people vulnerable to attack. The people respond by turning to God with a unified national vow and prayer. They come together in response to failure. We have begun this process. More remains to be done.

Maimonides' injunction to cry out might be transposed into a modern motto with the words of Winston Churchill, "Never let a good crisis go to waste." October 7 should prompt us to ask how we can build a more resilient Jewish society where compromise is more possible and common purpose more common.

Every day has its night, every light has its shadow. We cannot be asked to accept these shadows gladly. It is also not enough that we simply accept them. We must adjust our eyes to an old-new darkness.

Editor's Note

At this writing, almost three months into the war, the initial shock, horror, and trauma have in no way abated, and all thoughts are on the "*matzav*." In the three decades I have lived in Israel, it seems there has never been a period without a *matzav* – a "situation." While some episodes stand out, memory blurs and blends others into an ongoing situation, until the point that one might be forgiven for thinking that reality is all one long *matzav*. But this time is different, not just in scale and scope but in type. How that is, I will not attempt to analyze here and now. *Tradition* is not a platform for political commentary or analysis; we are also not well-suited to respond in real-time to unfolding events. But neither can we continue to produce or publish our normal offerings of scholarship in Orthodox Jewish thought as if these were normal days. In time, thoughtful thinkers will produce the type of long-form, intelligent writing about the meaning of our current moment, but before the war has even been named it is too early to imagine what such writers will say. (Will we call it the Simhat Torah War? I hope not.) Our readers understand that scholarship ferments over long periods of time. We are, after all, not a blog.

Nevertheless, breaking from our normal template, we preface the content of this long-planned issue with a number of short, reflective pieces on the war. Some were solicited, others came over the transom, all are deeply personal and offer insights that we thought likely to endure and are therefore deserving of publication in print. They will stimulate your own thinking now, as we are still immersed in the fog, and will in future happier days, we hope, prove to be artifacts which document how our intellectual leadership marshaled Orthodox Jewish thought in the face of unimaginably traumatic yet historic events.

In addition, drawing on their vast erudition, we are grateful that Rabbis J. David Bleich (writing in his "Review of Contemporary Halakhic Literature" column) and Daniel Z. Feldman have researched, written, and offered original scholarship on an array of halakhic challenges sitting at the intersection of Jewish sovereignty, war ethics, hostage negotiations, and national morale and morality. That these essays were penned with such rigor but on such short deadline is a testament to these gentlemen and to our halakhic tradition, which—when stressed by the often brutal realities of life on a national scale—responds heroically, with precision and integrity.

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Six months ago, *TRADITION* published our Summer 2023 issue featuring a special section commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. So many parallels between then and now have already been drawn since the outbreak of this "Yom Tov War" (a euphemism if ever there was one) that you scarcely need me to point them out. Revisiting the insights of those essays—all of which had been written months earlier; none of which could have imagined what we are currently experiencing—if viewed through the lens of this season, will offer much on which to reflect. Toward that goal, we have made the entire content of that symposium open access at TraditionOnline.org. In planning that issue we naively thought our authors were excavating near ancient history (*a half century ago!*); now we are reminded that past is tragically prologue.

During these sleepless nights, one thought recurs among many. As is often the case in Israel particularly, and in the Jewish world in general, we have all been heartened by signs of Jewish unity at this unprecedented moment. As a journal serving readers who take their Religious Zionism seriously, we could not go unaffected by scenes of *treif* Tel Aviv eateries kashering their kitchens to cater to *hayyalim*; or by stories of bareheaded, tattooed soldiers requesting *tzitzit*, "the best armor." From the other direction I was moved to tears by Haredi *yungermen* handing out Israeli flags at a Jerusalem intersection, and by reports of some of their yeshiva *havrutot* volunteering to draft. The fact is, this show of *ahdut* comes about following a period of extended and bitter national strife and division. Some with greater prophetic insight than I might claim that *mahloket* around the judicial reform was the very cause of our troubles. Remember, *just one day* before the attack we were arguing about a *mehitza* in Tel Aviv—the irony of that particular "dividing" symbol should be lost on no one. And yet, if *ahdut* means only that those on my right and those on my left who yesterday disagreed with me, and behaved differently than I do, now align themselves with my positions and practices—what kind unity is that? In what manner should members of our community be open to a realignment in ourselves for the sake of enduring Jewish unity? Religious Zionism was once a unifying force in the Jewish State and Jewish world, or at least aspired to be so. Perhaps returning to and reinforcing those values, a way to bind the nation's wounds as we care for its widows and orphans and those who bore the battle, will be a challenge our community will meet following our current abnormal *matzav*.

JEFFREY SAKS
Editor