

## Profits of Violence, Prophets of Peace

Vayechi 5783

Monday night's game between the Cincinnati Bengals and the Buffalo Bills was to be a pivotal one for Damar Hamlin. His path to the NFL was riddled with obstacles; he lost his father to prison and several friends to gun violence, and he was a sixth round draft pick out of Pitt. Seeing action in this game, between the two powerhouses of the AFC, was a crowning achievement. But after tackling Bengals receiver Tee Higgins, he got up- and then collapsed. In the presence of his terrified mother and teammates, he received CPR on the field, and then, after nine minutes, was transported to the University of Cincinnati Medical Center. Personnel there confirmed that Hamlin had experienced cardiac arrest, and was listed in critical condition.

ESPN reported that NFL officials gave the teams five minutes to warm up, before returning to the field- a report the NFL categorically denied, but ESPN affirmed<sup>1</sup>. The show, as they say, must go on. Eventually, Bengals coach Zac Taylor and Bills coach Sean McDermott conferred, and decided that it would be utterly inappropriate to continue the game- the players were in no condition to play, anyway. The Bills were huddled as a team in prayer for their teammate and friend,

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[https://www.si.com/nfl/2023/01/03/bills-bengals-game-nfl-scheduling-update-damar-hamlin-injury?fbclid=IwAR0QzUKZJk3GVb9b06xr19\\_ksNgwX8nZ35BlgEs1kLePJA1chCvn2BzcGV8](https://www.si.com/nfl/2023/01/03/bills-bengals-game-nfl-scheduling-update-damar-hamlin-injury?fbclid=IwAR0QzUKZJk3GVb9b06xr19_ksNgwX8nZ35BlgEs1kLePJA1chCvn2BzcGV8)

and Bengals players, including their QB Joe Burrow, came over to the Bills locker room later on to check on the Bills were holding up. Many players from both teams went to the hospital, where they held a prayerful vigil. Fans, too, shared thoughts and prayers on social media, and put their money where their mouth was- Hamlin's foundation, which provides toys to underprivileged children, went from raising about three thousand dollars before Monday night to over \$7 million! Various NFL players and teams responded generously. Robert Kraft, of the New England Patriots, ever the proud Jew, donated \$18,003. When, and if, the game will be made up remains to be seen.

More than the reports of long-term damage sustained by repeated body blows and concussions, events like these emphasize what a truly violent sport football is. It should really give us pause; what does it say about us, who enjoy watching others risk their health and abuse their bodies for our entertainment? To what degree are we complicit?

As Yaakov delivers his final message for each of his children, there is one message that stands out. It is not really a blessing at all- it is a scathing rebuke. There is no sugarcoating, no "compliment sandwich," no equivocating.

שְׁמַעוֹן וְלֵוִי אֲחֵים כָּלִי חֲמָס מִכְרֵיָהֶם:

Simeon and Levi are a pair;

Their weapons are tools of lawlessness.

בְּסֹדֶם אֶל־תִּבָּא נַפְשִׁי בְּקֹהֶלֶם אֶל־תֵּחַד כְּבֹדִי כִּי בְּאַפִּם הָרְגוּ אִישׁ וּבְרִצְנָם עָקְרוּ־שׁוֹר:

Let not my person be included in their council,

Let not my being be counted in their assembly.

For when angry they slay a man, *\*slay a man (So trad.)*

And when pleased they maim an ox. *\*maim an ox*

אֲרוּר אַפִּם כִּי עָז וְעִבְרָתָם כִּי קִשְׁתָּהּ אֲחֻלָּקָם בִּיַּעֲקֹב וְאַפִּיצֵם בִּישְׂרָאֵל: {פ}

Cursed be their anger so fierce,

And their wrath so relentless.

I will divide them in Jacob,

Scatter them in Israel.

Yaakov is referring to the actions taken by Shimon and Levi in avenging the rape of their sister Dina, when they massacred all the men in Shechem. What was Yaakov's

problem? It is the Rambam's contention that every man in Shechem was an accomplice to Shechem's horrifying act and therefore deserved to die. Yaakov's concern throughout was that, in their pursuit of vigilante justice, the brothers compromised his image in the presence of the surrounding tribes. His diffidence, therefore, was misguided. Was there no nobility in defending the honor of their sister?

Perhaps the problem wasn't Shimon and Levi's *actions*- it was their *methodology*. As the Spanish commentary Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher describes it, they didn't engage in violence as a deterrent, or as a last resort; Shimon and Levi were *purveyors* of violence, the definition of the term מכרוזיהם - meaning, their source of support and sustenance.

והכוונה בכלי חמס יחיו ויזונו.

Violence was how they earned their living and made their reputation, so *of course* they could not conceive of any other solution to the very real problem they faced. It was what they used to achieve any social, political or financial outcome they desired, and this was what Yaakov found to be abhorrent. Yaakov wanted to make it clear that this was not his way, and not the way he expected a member of his family to behave.

The events of Monday night should lead us to a moment of reflection. If indeed the NFL did pressure the players to resume the game after five minutes, it is yet another instance of their repeated *כלי המס מכרותיהם*, or profiting from the systemic violence that is not a bug, and not even a feature of the game, but rather a prerequisite. To be sure, not every player who gets hit hard goes into cardiac arrest, but the human body is not meant to withstand that kind of sustained trauma, a reality obfuscated by possibility of athletic scholarships, generous salaries and lucrative endorsement contracts. But to lay the blame solely at the feet of the NFL denies our own agency, and our ability to learn from this incident. Those of us who view football- or boxing, or hockey, wrestling or any other sport that inflicts damage on another- for pleasure; those of us who purchase merchandise from our favorite teams, and proudly share fandom as a heritage we pass on to our children; we all have to do some soul searching. Maybe we aren't yet ready to stop watching football- I confess that I'm not, certainly not when the Bills are doing so well (pooh pooh pooh)- but at least we need to reckon with the moral incongruity of our entertainment choices. Maybe we still watch, but we and our children don't need to participate in fantasy football leagues, which anyway remove team fandom and reduce actual people to nothing more than a bunch of statistics and a money making opportunity. *Al achas kama veKamma*, how much more so, should we avoid enriching this complex of violence by gambling on football games or any sporting

event, an issue serious enough on its own merits that it deserves its own sermon, which I will, *b'li neder*, speak about in the near future.

But *כלי חמס מכרתיהם* does not just refer to gladiatorial violence in the sporting arena. It refers to the kind of entertainment we choose to consume- television, movies and video games. By viewing entertainment that features violence to drive a plot, to glorify the perpetrators or to render the victims more sympathetic, we are also participating in the marketplace that promotes it. Beyond our choices of entertainment, though, the challenge of *כלי חמס מכרתיהם* reaches the fundamental aspects of our interaction with others. Yaakov was castigating his two sons not just for using violence in their actions, but for being violent in their essence. Being a violent person doesn't require any physical contact whatsoever. Ours is a society that rewards verbal violence- the charismatic, larger than life characters with the booming voices, the person with the best one-liners at the expense of others or the talking head who steamrolls a debate partner or doesn't let anyone else get a word in edgewise. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 1964, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said:

*Violence is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent*

*rather than win his understanding: it seeks to annihilate rather than convert<sup>2</sup>.*

There is a genre on youtube called “Epic takedowns,” featuring people across the political spectrum “leaving someone speechless” or “owning” them. Twitter was a format designed to platform the most vociferous voices, featuring posts and responses dueling one another to broadcast the highest level of outrage as they try to shut the other person down. Rather than relying on the merit of an intellectual argument, it is now about who is loudest, angriest and most aggressive. It’s one thing to engage in a debate; it’s another thing to view it as a bloodsport. What does the rebuke of Shimon and Levi mean for us? Aside from the mandate to reevaluate our entertainment choices, perhaps it is a call to us to stop revering people who are belligerent and aggressive. The person who “speaks truth to power,” the seemingly fearless person who “tells it like it is,” the parent who bullies teachers and other parents because they are “passionate about their kids”- these people are often not heroic, fearless advocates. They are just as likely to be abusive, pompous and uncouth blowhards, no matter how confident they are, how much they care about an issue, where they were educated and how many advanced degrees they have earned. Our challenge is to revere the people who are peaceful, who speak gently, whose actions and words elevate others, rather than take them down, whose

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/>

communications are non-violent and non-combative- and cultivate those attributes in ourselves. It is unfortunate that a catastrophic incident like this one is a catalyst for long-overdue soul searching; it is even more unfortunate that most people will not see it as such.

On Thursday, Damar Hamlin woke up, apparently showing positive signs with regard to his cognition;

*“Did we win?” Hamlin scribbled on a clipboard, according to Dr. Timothy Pritts, vice chair for clinical operations at UC Health. “Yes, Damar, you won. You’ve won the game of life,”*<sup>3</sup>

Let us rise to the occasion as well, so we can win the game of life, too; let us stop rewarding aggression and violence in all of its forms, and live up to our motto- דרכיה דרכי נעם וכל נתיבותיה שלום.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/05/sports/football/damar-hamlin-bills-week-18-patriots.html>