

**The Love of Life and the Love of Death:**  
**A World of Yom Kippur or a World of Purim?**

**Yom Kippur 5775**  
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There is the story of a rabbi who was visiting some elderly congregants at a nursing home. When he saw Mrs. Goldberg, he asked how she was doing. “Not bad for an eighty year old,” she replied. The rabbi said, “Mrs. Goldberg, in our tradition when we want people to live a long time we say that they should live to 120. So, I wish for you 40 more years of good health!” “Thank you, rabbi,” said Mrs. Goldberg. When the rabbi saw Mrs. Cohen, he greeted her and asked how she was doing, “Not bad for a woman of 100 years.” “I wish for you 20 more years of health and joy,” said the rabbi. Mrs. Levine was the oldest resident in the Nursing Home. The rabbi engaged her in conversation. As he was getting ready to leave she said, “You know, rabbi, I am 120 years old.” The rabbi was astonished by her longevity. In response, all he could say was “Have a nice day.”

Let me begin, therefore, by wishing us all a good day. For despite the solemnity and seriousness of this day, we believe that our prayers will be answered and, indeed, we shall be inscribed and sealed, if not until we reach the age of 120, then, at least, for this coming year.

There is something else I would like to point out about the solemnity of this day. Today is referred to by our sages *Yom Nora V’Ayom*, a day of fear, a day of awe. It is called this in part because we confront our own shortcomings, our transience and our own mortality. We look around and wonder if we shall be here next year, and we contemplate both our love of life and our fears of dying. In fact, this day of Yom Kippur can be understood as the day on which we are actually given a taste of death. The rituals of this day are intended to fill us with such thoughts, by creating a rehearsal of our own deaths.

- As a body is immersed in *mikveh* water while it is being prepared for burial. It is traditional to prepare for Yom Kippur by immersing in a *mikveh*.
- On Yom Kippur, we dress in white, not as a sign of purity, but as a reminder of the *tachrichin*, the shrouds traditionally used when a person is buried.
- This is a day of bodily abstinence; we refuse food and water as if we were dead.
- And, like one whose soul is about to leave its body, we focus this day on the soul we carry.

Today, we sense that life is the balance. We are aware of the foreboding specter of death. We pray for life even as we rehearse for death. And, as people who love life, today we feel vulnerable, we feel uncertain. We pray with trepidation because we think of death and are afraid of dying.

The sanctity and solemnity of *Yom Kippur* (The Day of Atonement) or, more accurately, *Yom Kippurim* is reflected in the name of a day set aside for introspection, fasting, confession and atonement. And it is because of the unparalleled holiness of this day that the similarity of the name “*Yom Kippurim*” with another holiday is particular ironic. Indeed, more than one rabbi has

pointed out that, by adjusting the pronunciation only slightly, *Yom Kippurim* becomes *Yom K'Purim*, a day like Purim, a strange paradox, to say the least.

Purim of course is the holiday of revelry and merry making on the Jewish calendar. Purim is a day of physical pleasures: we laugh, we imbibe and we put on costumes which enable us to adopt a new, false persona. On Purim we can be anyone we want and act in ways that, at any other time, would be totally out of character and, at times, even inappropriate. On Purim, the absurd becomes normal. In short, Purim is Yom Kippur's polar opposite.

Yom Kippur and Purim: Two days, diametrically opposed to one another in messages and moods. One day represents the sanctity and precious nature of life, the other, the absurdity of life. Two days which convey each other's opposite. This year, however, more than at any time I can recall, the messages and moods of these two days seem to have converged on their own.

As I reflect today on the situation in Israel, beneath the fighting of this past summer, I sense that the two sides in the conflict, Israel and Hamas, represent very different views of the goals and justification of this ongoing conflict, radically different perspectives from each other. One perspective is articulated through the themes and seriousness of Yom Kippur. The other perspective reminds us of the care-free abandon of Purim. Allow me to explain.

While in Israel, as you know from my correspondences over the summer, sirens went off in Jerusalem. And when a siren went off everyone knew where to go and what to do. In Jerusalem, as the rockets were shot toward us from about 70 miles away, we had about a minute and a half to find a safe place to enter. The fact is, however, that those rockets were not accurate. They were shot in a general direction and at an angle which would carry it to an approximate location. The chances of being killed or injured by a rocket fired from Gaza, shot from 70 miles away are very small, almost negligible. We ran for our lives, nonetheless.

After we made our second or third dash to a bomb shelter, I realized something: The rockets fired by Hamas were not shot with the intent to kill Jews. Of course, if you kill a Jew, that's icing on the cake. But the purpose of firing rockets into Israel is to undermine the confidence of Israelis. These rockets are intended to convey the message that the government and the armies of Israel cannot, in fact, protect her citizens.

*You have the strongest army in the region, they say. You can destroy every physical structure we possess. But, you cannot stop us from shooting our rockets. You may think that you are safe, but you are not.*

After all of the destruction we rained down upon Gaza, we still needed to run for cover, **terrified that we might die. We ran because we are afraid of death. They, welcomed death, however, and became martyrs.** Hamas laughed and said:

*You can kill some of us, and that is fine. So long as we can still shoot a rocket across our border into Israel, you will know that death does not scare us. We are not afraid of death, as you are. And you will run from us because you cherish life. We welcome*

*destruction. We welcome death. You cherish life. We yearn for martyrdom. And for that reason, we win!*

The success of Hamas, you see, was not measured by the numbers of Jews that were killed. In the Purim-world which they inhabit, success is measured by the degree of fear which they generated among Israelis. That was how Yassir Arafat, the PLO Leader and master of psychological warfare put it: **The goal of terrorism is to provoke Israeli desperation.** The rockets of Hamas may have missed every physical target for which they were aiming, but they hit every psychological target for which they were intended. The Israeli Air Force bombed and bombed and destroyed building and homes and decimated neighborhoods. But, as soon as there was a lull in the action, a Hamas operative, hiding in the rubble, would shoot a rocket into Israel and send a message: *You fear death. We do not.*

And this is Hamas. This is radical Islam. This, by the way, is ISIS as well. This is a world upside down. This is Purim.

This is the theatre of the absurd performed, not on the stage but in life. In a rational world, to love death renders life meaningless. Life becomes a joke and the world is turned upside down. The world of Hamas, however, is a Purim world in which unmitigated evil can reside, comfortably and without intrusion. And that world of crazy and absurd notions, seems to be infecting the entire world.

The points I make, made more eloquently and cogently by PM Netanyahu, this week fell upon deaf ears at the UN, of course. And why don't they listen? Why did the representatives of their respective countries not listen to a rational argument? Because Purim, by definition, is irrational. Like the hatred of Jews in general, the world's rejection of Israel's legitimate concerns is not rational. Their rejection of Israel is irrational and that which is not rational cannot be engaged or refuted by that which is rational. And that emphatic and infectious mindset has found a most hospitable home in the halls of the UN.

The UN today has become the "Carnegie Hall" of anti-Semitism, providing the most prominent stage in the world for the encouragement and promotion of anti-Israel perorations, Israel-bashing sessions and anti-Israel votes. In the General Assembly, Israel has been formally criticized over the years more than three times as often as all other countries combined. And at no time has this bullying been more evident than with respect to recent events in Israel and in Gaza. Logically, the behavior of Hamas should have been met with world-wide condemnation, while the restraint and the concern of the IDF for the lives of the Palestinian People should be lauded in every corner of the world. But in "Purim Land" good is labeled evil and recognition and appreciation is replaced by derision and denunciations. Let me remind you of these events with a few examples:

We know, the world knows and Israel knows that the IDF does not deliberately kill civilians. We know this, I know this, because our children are the ones fighting in Gaza and they provide first hand testimony. I know because I spoke to an Israeli pilot who detailed for me the often-used procedure for aborting a bombing mission when civilians are present. He has used this procedure to call of a bombing mission as have the other

pilots. But this fact could not find its way to the UN General Assembly, let alone the general press.

We know that houses in Gaza were booby-trapped, that schools and mosques concealed caches of arms and entrances to tunnels and were repeatedly used as launching pads for rockets. But we heard no criticism of this blatant breach of international law. Instead, when Israel blows up the house in order to destroy the tunnel, Israel is criticized.

We know that dead Palestinian civilians serve the cause of Hamas, not Israel. So, when Hamas stored missiles and ammunition in schools, in hospitals, civilians would be killed, where is the condemnation of Hamas? Where are the voices of outrage which should come from the international body whose role in the world is to protect the vulnerable who cannot defend themselves. The world was and remains silent.

Hamas knowingly lies by inflating the numbers of casualties and the circumstances of civilian deaths in order to promote its own cause and agenda. And although, following objective investigations, Hamas' claims have been proven to be lies, the damage has already been done. And the labels of "Jewish Nazis" and "Israeli baby-killers" have become commonplace.

Earlier this week, Mahmoud Abbas, the so-called "moderate" leader of the Palestinian Authority, now serving in the ninth year of his four-year term, spoke before the UN's General Assembly, delivering a speech which brought lying in the UN to a new level. Irrefutable facts were rendered irrelevant as Israel was accused of committing war crimes and genocide. And here, we must not be silent.

It is irrefutable that:

- Israel warned inhabitants to get out of building which were being targeted
- Israel set up field hospitals to attend to injured Gazans
- Israel sent, and continues to send, truckloads of humanitarian aid to the Palestinians in Gaza

None of this sounds like genocide. And yet, Mr. Abbas neglected to mention these facts when he charged Israel with genocide. Nor did he mention the thousands of missiles fired into Israel prior to Israel retaliating. Truth at the UN has been obscured beyond recognition.

Even in instances in which all that is required is a basic sense of compassion, is more than we can expect from the international forum of the UN.

When three Israeli teenage boys were kidnapped and killed by Hamas, the world re-cast this tragedy by deeming these young students as settlers who were worthy of execution.

Where was the world's outrage, the condemnation of those who rejoice in the streets when our children are killed? Where are the expressions of sympathy, let alone a commitment by the Palestinian Authority to find the murderers?

And still, throughout the denunciations and diatribes, Israel has shown remarkable restraint, restraint which has always been part of Israel's policies. I list only a few examples:

When rockets are fired from a mile away at *S'derot*, *Netivot* and other towns and kibbutzim near Gaza, not a few but thousands of rockets, each falling upon target less than 15 seconds after they are fired, for year after year, **we ran for shelter rather than shooting back.**

When the rockets continued to rain down, by the hundreds, we invented a defensive system to intercept the rocket so that our people are not harmed. And we protested to the UN, to the US and to anyone who might listen. **And we restrained ourselves.**

And when terrorists infiltrate Israel through tunnels, tunnels dug for the exclusive and explicit intent of killing Israelis, we intercept them if we are lucky. **The world chose to turn a blind eye. Israel restrained itself.**

And after Israeli warnings, after pleading for others to denounce Hamas' plans to infiltrate Israel for the purpose of killing us, **still Israel did not act.**

After restraining herself and waiting for someone else to step in and to stop the blatant disregard for the lives of Jews, we retaliated... and **only then are voices from all over the world are heard as condemnations of Israel began and do not stop.**

Israel receives no sympathy for the years it has endured attacks, no acknowledgement of her restraint and no recognition for the attempts of the Israeli army to evacuate the local populations in order to spare their lives. We receive no honor. No respect. And, for the sake of the world, that is a tragedy, because what we are witnessing is the process by which criminals are exonerated while those worthy of respect are reviled and rebuked.

This is what happens when the world is seen through Purim glasses. This has been at the core of the philosophical differences between Israel and its detractors.

Following fifty days of fighting, there was no celebration in Israel. How could we celebrate? Instead, our people have emerged deflated, not because our army did not perform, but because, despite our military prowess we lost 72 of our soldiers. Despite our strength and the degree of accuracy of our bombs, we killed 2,000 Gazans, 1,000 who were certainly Hamas members, but another 1,000 who are called "collateral damage." To a people for whom peace with their neighbors and protecting life are a basic, fundamental principles, the killing 1,000 women, children or elderly people is anathema.

For Israel, Yom Kippur is about realizing that death is not far from us, that we are vulnerable. Israel may not sense an existential threat coming from Gaza. But Gaza teaches us that there is a parallel universe, a place, just next to Israel, where life is devalued and death is celebrated. What Israelis now understand is that when winning implies being killed, one cannot win. Moreover, Israelis are deflated because the Jewish State has come to realize that peace with Gaza is no

longer a realistic goal, because we have realized that, indeed, despite their losses, in defeat, Hamas has emerged victorious.

Hamas' victory is reflected in their losses: in the loss of property, in the loss of innocent bystanders, in the loss of children who are carried by their grieving mothers before cameras of photographers representing nearly every country in the world, anxious to show the world how Israel kills children. And Hamas celebrates. And Hamas remains popular. And Hamas will become even more popular as they will be credited with the re-building of Gaza.

There is no moral equivalence between Israel and Hamas. At the same time, I do not intend to suggest that all the issues here are black and white, that one side must be discounted because it is morally bankrupt and, therefore, not worthy of consideration. That is not the case. Despite our radically different worldviews, Palestinians have legitimate claims while Israel has some serious flaws. It would be disingenuous to state that Israel meets all of its own standards in every area, let alone standards established for Israel by others.

Israel, for example, falls short in its treatment of Israeli Arabs. Visit an Arab village and you will know immediately that the benefits which are received by Israeli Arabs, the education they receive, the services and the upkeep of the cities where they live, are nothing like those received by Israeli Jews. This is true for Israeli Arabs. This is the case, perhaps even more so, with the Bedouin and Druze populations of Israel, as well. Israel must do better.

It is widely acknowledged that Israel must withdraw from Judea and Samaria, known as well as the West Bank. It may surprise you to know that Israel wants to extricate itself from the disputed territories as urgently and as passionately the Palestinian People want an end to Israeli military oversight. Israel is in a no-win situation in the West Bank since we cannot give that area to Palestinians without assurances that it will not become another terrorist enclave to threaten Israel. Israel wants out and I pray that she will figure out a way to withdraw. But, for those who say with cavalier certainty that Israel must get out of the territories, ask them how: How do they envision a Palestinian State in that area, with no ruler to lead, without Palestinian government which is invested with authority from all factions and with no way to prevent Radical Islamist from overrunning the area with a new ISIS army? Israel wants out. But at what price? With what plan?

On the battlefield, in the battles Israel must fight, there are, to be sure, instances in which Israel has fallen short. There are Israeli soldiers who may act in cruel or vengeful ways. In those cases, they are wrong. Mistakes must be investigated and, if necessary charges must be brought. We are not perfect, to be sure. Israel knows that it must improve.

My class on Israel, which I teach on Sunday mornings began last week (but, if you would like to start tomorrow, you won't be far behind and I will have a make-up session for those who begin this week). In that class, over a series of weeks, we will initiate a conversation about the "tribes," if you will, which make up the modern State of Israel. Israel is made up of factions which are in conflict with one another. We will speak of those various tribes/cohort: Orthodox, Haredi, Liberal, Arab Israelis and even the North American Jewish Community. Israel is a wonderful place, but Israeli society is deeply fractured.

The question which we will address is: Can a people so deeply divided find a way to share one homeland? Can Israel live up to her own ideals and mission as a Jewish, Democratic state, and create space for all of the different tribes and factions which live there?

Israelis argue vociferously with each other about the meaning of a Jewish state and Zionism, the role of Judaism Israel and hundreds of other contentious issues. One of the jokes circulating in Israel this summer was that Hamas lies about everything. For example, Hamas claimed that it fired rockets into Tel Aviv and killed 100 Zionists. Israelis knew that it was a lie because there are not 100 Zionists in Tel Aviv! The fact is that Israelis see the problems and the divisions. They do not ignore their own flaws and, in this course, neither shall we.

Before I conclude, I want to respond to a question I have been asked from within our community and from the outside. Specifically:

*Why must I continue to speak about Israel? It's enough. Other rabbis don't speak about Israel. We have heard all of the speeches. We know Israel has most of the world against it, but we have heard all of this before.*

My response is, you are right. You have heard this before, in different formulations at different times. But you are correct about something else: others don't speak about Israel. Perhaps they don't speak because they are confused about what to say or where they stand. Perhaps their own ambivalence prevents them. I am neither confused nor ambivalent. And I speak about Israel today for several reasons, among which are:

1. In the light of the presentations made at the UN, when the lies told by Pres. Abbas about Israel and the War in Gaza, are treated like facts, someone must speak. We cannot, we must not remain silent, which can be read by some as approval (as it says in the Talmud, *shtika k'hodaya dami* – silence is acquiescence). We cannot remain silent.
2. I believe that one of the great threats to Israel today takes place on our college campuses. Our children, when they arrive on campus, are themselves besieged with information and claims about Israel which is simply false. And our kids need to know that there is another side that their homeland is not guilty of war crimes, that Israel acts with restraint and that, although Israel is not perfect, you can be proud of Israel. And if your children in college are not here, please send them this sermon (which will be put out online tomorrow) because they need to understand that the world described by the Palestinian activists on campus is true only in the context of Purim.
3. I believe that, in a world in which our homeland cannot buy a friend, her friends, few and far-between as they are, must speak up. If we do not speak up for Israel, we, whose homeland is embattled and whose people are under constant attack, who will?

My friends, we cherish the lives with which we are blessed. We realize the fragility and vulnerability of life and on this day we find comfort and strength as we sit among the other members of our community. We are frightened by the prospects of our deaths and this day, in its power and majesty both terrifies and reassures. We are vulnerable but we are not helpless.

And so, on this day of Yom Kippur we refuse to allow Purim to permeate the solemnity of our day and the sincerity of our prayers, we refuse to allow death to be seen as victory and we refuse to devalue the holiness of all humanity. We refuse to sit in silence when our people are threatened. We refuse to be still when our homeland is maligned and attacked. For we have ringing within our ears the mandate given to our people by the Prophet Isaiah who called upon us over 3,000 years ago to take a stand on behalf of Israel. His words reverberate and resonate to this day:

*Lima'an Tzion Lo Escheh, U'Lima'an Yirushalayin Lo Eshkot  
Ad Yaitzei KiNogah Tzidka, ViYeshu'ata KiLapid Yiv'ar.*

*For the sake of Zion will I not hold my peace and for the sake of Jerusalem will I not rest,  
Until her justice shines bright and her salvation like a flaming torch.  
(Isaiah 62:1)*

May we all be granted a year of blessings to be savored, a year of strength to help us endure and a year of peace, for us, for Jerusalem and for all humanity to celebrate.

*V'Chen Yehi Ratzon, V'nomar Amen.*