

Reflections a week after the Simchat Torah Massacres

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This week has been the most challenging week for the Jewish People, (possibly) since the Holocaust. The images that keep coming in will scar us for life. All week, I (and I know so many of us) have been having what I call "Brain Fog". We cannot think clearly. Our minds jump from one topic to another topic and have no rest. On Friday, I was just so emotionally drained that I laid down for a few minutes on the couch with the intent to go back to getting ready for Shabbos a few minutes later. I found myself unable to get off the couch. I wasn't tired or sleeping, just totally weighed down. What was weighing me (and all of us) down?

We just read the prayer for the *Cholim* (sick). in addition to the handful of names of friends and family that we always say, I had in mind the thousands of Injured in Israel. That prayer was so Heavy with all of those people. And you see this paper here that I have in my hand? It is a list of the Hebrew names of all the *Chatufim/Shvuyim* (Kidnapped Hostages). The paper weighs almost nothing but as I try to hold it up, it feels like the heaviest paper in the world. It is so heavy to carry (but we must not let go of it). all the names. each person is an *עולם מלא* (a full world). Men, women, children, babies, elderly people. How scared they are right now somewhere in Gaza. All of them with parents and loved ones praying and doing everything to get them out. This piece of paper is so Heavy. It weighs us down.

We are all feeling so many emotions. we are feeling the brain-fog, we are feeling the weight of the pain of our brothers and sisters. We are also feeling scared. We are feeling inspired (by the *chayalim*, by the heroes who fought (and the many who didn't survive), we are feeling comforted by the unity of Am Yisrael and the tremendous acts of chesed that are taking place. Let us allow ourselves to feel all of these emotions as they are all so important in this moment.

And then there are other emotions that we have as we think about the war itself and the ground invasion which will begin very soon. So many of us have found strength and affirmation in seeing almost universal support from our politicians and non-Jews in general. We all have our stories. Earlier this week, the clergy from the church next door stopped by and delivered flowers as they expressed their support for Israel and the Jewish people during our time of need. And yesterday at davening, someone handed me a \$100 bill from his manicurist. She does not have a lot of discretionary money but she gave him the \$100 to give to his rabbi to send the money to support the troops in Israel. So right now we are (mostly) feeling a lot of support for Tzahal and for Medinat Yisrael. But I know that we are all worried as we receive the support that it will be short lived. and that as this war goes on and Civilian death toll rises in Gaza, the support will quickly turn to silence and then outright condemnation of Tzahal and Israel.

And so I want to say something about our own emotions when we see civilian deaths in Gaza. And I will make two points. I am about to say something more hawkish than I have ever said in my life (point #1) and I will also say something that might sound very dovish to some of you (point #2). But the statements are neither hawkish nor dovish. I believe they represent the true Torah approach at this moment.

Point 1 - When we see civilian deaths in Gaza, it is forbidden to feel guilt. *אסור לבקש מחילה*. it is forbidden to apologize or be apologetic. There is one party that is guilty for every death in Gaza and that is Hamas and Hamas alone. The international community and the UN and others will criticize. And I don't care one bit about their criticism. Even some of

our supporters are saying we have a "right" to defend ourselves. This is not correct. We have an **obligation** to defend ourselves. This is not a מלחמת רשות (A war that we have a "right" to battle). This is a מלחמת מצוה and really a מלחמת חובה (obligatory war).

When Hamas comes in and kills 1300 of our citizens in such a barbaric way, we must fight this war and destroy this evil. And frankly, I don't care what the world says. The Torah says: ובערת הרע מקרבך. we must destroy the evil from our midst. ולא יזידון עוד. so that this never happens again. הבה להרגך - if someone comes to kill you - השכם והרגו - you must kill them first. So, when the IDF is destroying Hamas, which embeds itself in the civilian population, there will be many civilian casualties. And each and every death in Gaza is the fault of Hamas alone. **We must be crystal clear about this point.**

But point #1 (that we are not allowed to ask for forgiveness or feel guilty for any of the deaths) cannot be mixed up with a second point, or a second emotion. When we see deaths on their side and when we see 1 million people having to leave their homes, we cannot turn our eyes away from it. We must feel sad and broken. Every innocent person in Gaza is also an עולם מלא - An entire world for them and for their family. We should cry over every person. Crying over their deaths is not the same thing as feeling guilty or apologetic or to think that our chayalim are, G-d forbid, engaged in an immoral war.

My sense is that people are having a very hard time distinguishing these two emotions (sadness and guilt). And they think that if they are sad for the deaths of Gazans then we must be doing something wrong. So they turn away. They don't want to see. Or sometimes worse, I am hearing people say awful things like all "Gazans are animals who don't deserve to live."

This is not the Torah approach. At the seder, we spill drops of wine during the plagues and we say "we are doing this because we feel the pain of the other side". And while the origin of that custom/explanation is actually in dispute, the sentiment is correct and based on a *Midrash* that actually has halachic implications. Why don't we say full Hallel on the 7th day of Pesach? The *Mishna berura* quotes the Midrash that says "Hashem says, My people are drowning in the sea (Egyptians) and you are going to sing *Shira* (Hallel) before me?" Now what did the Egyptians do? They enslaved us for hundreds of years and threw our babies into the sea. Yet Hashem didn't want us to say Hallel (I assume) because there were civilians amongst those drowning and how could we sing Hallel.

In a few weeks, we are going to read about Yaakov and Esav. Esav wanted to kill his brother Yaakov. He was coming with 400 men to kill him. Yaakov prepares for battle and the text says ויירא יעקב מאד, ויצר לו. "Yaakov was very FRIGHTENED and it DISTRESSED him". Rashi wants to know why is there a double-language of both FEAR and DISTRESS. Rashi (based on Midrash) says: "He was afraid - for he might be killed. And he was in distress - that he might have to kill others". Yes, even when Tzahal is fighting an obligatory battle, when people are trying to kill us and we are obligated to kill them; we must be sad, especially when civilians are killed. The Ralbag even goes further and says "DISTRESS is a stronger emotion than FEAR. The prospect that he might be forced to kill was more disturbing to Jacob than the possibility that he might be killed."

I know that some people will think that this is not the time to teach these Torah ideas (of sadness and pain for death of civilians on the other side). They will say that "in time of war, we only have to worry about our side." But my feeling is that if we only teach these ideas as we are sitting in our comfortable homes at the Pesach Seder (during times of Peace); then it's just a nice idea. (A "vort"). But it is not real. It is only real Torah if we say it right now. In this Moment.

Again, I want to be crystal clear. אסור לבקש מחילה. When we see these deaths, we should allow ourselves to feel sad and in pain but we are not allowed to let the sadness morph into feelings of guilt or to be apologetic. Tzahal is engaged in an obligatory war and there will be, tragically, many civilian deaths and internal displacement and so much suffering. And every ounce of suffering to Gazans is 100 percent the blame of Hamas. But we are also not allowed to have our confidence in the ethical obligation of this war prevent us from feeling sadness over each and every civilian death in Gaza.

And one more thing. This has nothing to do with moral equivalence. Moral equivalence is making the morally corrupt comparison between Hamas butchering 1300 people and IDF defending its people from being butchered. Anyone who makes that moral equivalence is corrupt.

I am talking about pain and suffering, and when it comes to pain and suffering there is no such thing as moral equivalence. We aren't in a competition of who suffers more. The death and suffering of any innocent person must be seen and witnessed. That is what it means to be a human. Hamas has already killed so many of our bodies, Let us not allow them to kill our souls. By turning our souls away from human suffering.

Finally, I want to make one more point about the Heaviness I talked about in the beginning. How can we rise up from it to act? I think we just have to look at our brothers and sisters in Israel for inspiration. There are signs all over Israel - ביחד ננצח - In unity we will be victorious. Now that we are fighting this מלחמת חובה (obligatory war), we have a secret weapon. It is our Unity. It is all the acts of Chesed pouring in from all segments of Israeli Society to support the IDF and to support the families of the Chatufim (hostages), the murdered and the injured. It is every single person who has cooked food or made deliveries or brought a little bit of joy to people in hardship.

One beautiful thing we have seen is all of these weddings of Reservists who were supposed to get married a month from now or 6 months from now. But now since they are going off to battle (and don't know if they will return) so many have quickly gathered friends and family (and complete strangers who are cooking for them and doing everything to make them beautiful impromptu weddings before they go off to war). As I was seeing pictures of these weddings, I kept thinking about the song that we sing at weddings which is based on *pesukim* from Yirmiyahu

עוד ישמע בערי יהודה ובחוצות ירושלים קול ששון וקול שמחה קול חתן וקול כלה

Let there soon be heard in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, the sound of joy and the sound of gladness, the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride.

But many people don't realize that the original pasuk from Jeremiah makes it clear that the song is sung in a context of great despair and destruction.

Jeremiah 33:10-11

Let there soon be heard... in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, - **that are desolate, without humans, without inhabitants, without animals—**

the sound of joy and the sound of gladness, the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride.

The original context of this joyous song is actually one similar to what many of us are feeling right now. The pain and suffering of our brothers and sisters in Israel. The desolate cities and kibbutzim of the south as they have been evacuated. The heavy weight of that paper which lists all the names of the Hostages. Yes, we need to feel it all. But we also need to look over to Israel and see that at this moment, *chayalim* are getting married. People are rushing to help and support. People are loving and caring for each other and bringing so much light to the darkness. We feel the pain and we also feel the Love and unity at the same time. עוד ישמע בערי יהודה...

ביחד ננצח

Hashem should watch over all of us and give us strength. Shabbat shalom.