



*Parshat Vayetze*  
**November 24, 2012—10 Kislev 5773**  
**Praying for the Palestinians:**  
**Moral Equivalency or Compassionate Humanity?**  
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One of the benefits of Skype is that it allows you to connect with people all over the world in real time so that you instantly plug into each other's realities. You see each other. You hear each other. You get each other. Last Sunday, when Shira and I skyped with our family in Israel--we in our kitchen, my Israeli family in their kitchen--it drove home the very different worlds we inhabit.

How are you, they asked. We were putting together a shopping list for a massive Costco run, to buy ingredients for the dessert and appetizers for which we were responsible for Thanksgiving.

How are you, we asked? They were not thinking about Costco. Rather, they related the following story. Last Friday night, my Israeli nephews, Orthodox Jews, carried something unusual to the Shabbat dinner table: cell phones. They never carry cell phones on Shabbat, but they were instructed to do so by the Israeli army lest they be called to war. In fact, first David's cell phone went off in the middle of Shabbat dinner. He was called to war. My nephew David is a huge lefty. He is very committed to the Aravah Institute, which is both a nature preserve, and a place that tries to bring Israelis and Palestinians together in peaceful dialogue. He participates in a session at the Aravah Institute attended by Israelis and Palestinians to mark the most difficult day for dialogue, our Yom Haatzmaut, which is their Nakbah day. Our independence is their nightmare. How can Jews affirm our independence, and also hear their nightmare; how can Arabs affirm their nightmare, and also hear our independence? Hard, maybe impossible to do.

But that is David's idealism. And yet he was mobilized to wage a ground war. A few minutes after David's cell phone went off, his younger brother Netanel's phone went off. He too was called up.

For both brothers, this is the first time they were called to war. My brother in law Ari, who was in a tank in the Yom Kippur war, spent the remaining few minutes they shared together at the Shabbat dinner table before the boys left home giving them fatherly advice and counsel as to how to prepare for, and conduct oneself while in the middle of, a war.

Shabbat shalom. Shabbat shalom. Hugs. Kisses. Off to war. Back to an empty table with palpable fear and uncertainty. I cannot imagine that the rest of the Shabbat dinner was very peaceful.

The asymmetry of our conversation on Skype—we worrying about our shopping list at Costco, they worrying about their sons fighting a ground war in Gaza—has stayed with me, and helps to explain a ferocious conflict between two Conservative rabbis, Rabbi Danny Gordis who founded and headed the Ziegler Rabbinical School at the American Jewish University before he made aliyah some 15 years ago, and Rabbi Sharon Brous, the rabbi of a congregation called IKAR in Los Angeles who is routinely included in the list of the most influential rabbis in America. Here is the issue: what should our attitude be towards the Palestinians caught in the cross fire? Not the terrorists. Not the murderers. But the women, children and civilians who are also killed in the tragic fog of war. Do we pray for Palestinians? While there is now a fragile ceasefire, this issue is not going away.

In her message to her congregation, Rabbi Brous was careful both to affirm Israel's right to defend itself against Hamas' rocket attacks and to affirm concern for the Palestinian people who are also suffering in this conflict. She says as follows:

*I believe that the Israeli people, who have for years endured a barrage of rocket attacks targeting innocents and designed to create terror, instability and havoc, have the right and the obligation to defend themselves. I also believe that the Palestinian people, both in Gaza and the West Bank, have suffered terribly and deserve to live full and dignified lives....*

*Supporting Israel's right to protect and defend itself does not diminish the reality that the Palestinian people are also children of God, whose suffering is real and undeniable.*

In response to this, Rabbi Gordis wrote a piece whose very title conveys his thesis:

“When Balance Becomes Betrayal.” This is the crux of his response:

*Why cannot a leader of the American Jewish community say that the only reason that Israel and Hamas are at war is that Hamas wants to destroy Israel? Does anyone really imagine that even a return to the 1967 borders would mollify Hamas? How do I know that it would not? Because they say so. They say that they will never end the ‘armed resistance’ until the “Zionist entity’ is utterly eradicated. Why don’t we believe them?...*

*Why can we not simply say that at this moment, Israel’s enemies are evil? That they’re wrong?...[W]hen Israel left Gaza, the Palestinians elected Hamas, and ...when Mubarak fell, the Egyptians elected the Muslim Brotherhood? Why are these obvious facts utterly unmentionable? Because hope must spring eternal?*

It turns out that this issue—to what extent do we care about, express concern for, pray for, Palestinians caught in the cross fire—is prismatic of deeper tensions. In three important respects, I believe that Rabbi Gordis is right.

First, always balancing our concern for Jews with our concern for Palestinians does express a certain moral equivalence. We have suffered. They have suffered. We have our dead. They have their dead. We have our narrative. They have their narrative.

In fact, there is no moral equivalence here. Hamas murders. Hamas maims. Hamas terrorizes. Hamas *is* evil. And Hamas started this war by bombing us with thousands of bombs. Israel *is* good. It was fighting a defensive war and doing what any state would and should do: protecting its own citizens.

Second, it is hard to square soft, compassionate words about the Palestinians with the reality of what is actually happening in the world. Bombing innocent Jews makes Hamas more popular than ever on the Palestinian street. This is the New York Times this past Tuesday:

*Ramallah, West Bank—In the daily demonstrations here of solidarity with Gaza, a mix of sympathy and anguish, there is something else: growing identification with the Islamist fighters of Hamas and derision for the Palestinian Authority, which Washington considers the only viable partner for peace with Israel.*

*‘Strike a blow on Tel Aviv!’ proclaimed the lyrics of a new hit song blasting from shops and speakers at Monday’s demonstration, in a reference to Hamas rockets that make it nearly to Israel’s economic and cultural capital. ‘Don’t let the Zionists sleep!’ We don’t want a truce or a solution! Oh, Palestinians, you can be proud!’*

How do we pray for the Palestinians when they are singing about striking a blow on Tel Aviv?

Third, Danny Gordis’ kids, like other Israelis, are on the front lines, while Sharon Brous’ kids, and my own kids, are not. It is that asymmetry again. We do Thanksgiving. They do war. Given that asymmetry, I can understand how it would be hard for Israelis to take expressions of even-handedness and balance and sympathy for the Palestinians from Americans who do not know from bomb shelters and sleepless nights worrying about their kids doing hand to hand combat in Gaza.

And yet, remarkably enough, Rabbi Brous is also right. But that she is also right testifies to the greatness and nobility of Israel’s spirit. For ironically, paradoxically, we learn to have compassion for Palestinians not from American rabbis, but from Israelis themselves. While locked in a war with Hamas, Israel at the same time continues to offer humanitarian aid and relief, food, water, and medicine, into Gaza. Israel’s hospitals treat patients from Gaza. The chief of the Rambam Medical Center, Professor Rafael Beyar, pointed out that Rambam is treating Gaza citizens, even while Israeli civilians are getting pounded by rockets fired from Gaza. Boyar was at the University of Haifa when the news broke that the chief Hamas terrorist

architect, Ahmed Jabari, was slain, and Boyar was horrified to see Arab students observe a moment of silence for the slaying of this terrorist. And yet, in the hospital, he and his colleagues do not see Palestinians or Israelis, Arabs or Jews. They see only people who need healing.

It is all so complicated, and this complexity is not lessened by the recent, fragile ceasefire. To the contrary. The images in Gaza and Southern Israel after the cease fire say it all. The Palestinians cheer their victory, as they see it, carrying different flags of different colors, coming together, literally dancing in the street. Dancing in the street despite starting a war which resulted in death and destruction in their own community, and death and destruction in Southern Israel. In sharp contrast, the Israelis are somber and sober. No Israelis are cheering. There is nothing to cheer about. Yes, the Iron Dome worked. But how sad, how deeply sad, that Jews sing *oseh shalom* and the Palestinians sing about striking a blow on Tel Aviv. How deeply sad we don't have a peace partner. How deeply sad that there is no credible path towards peace. Only wars that start, pause, and start again.

The reality is that it is naïve and not clear eyed to speak of peace, given that it takes two to make peace, and only Israel seeks it. The reality is that it is sober and clear eyed to speak not of peace, but of managing a conflict that has no end. The sad Israeli metaphor that takes this in is mowing the lawn. Every few years, Israel has to mow the lawn, and then the grass grows back.

Which leads me back to the core question that occasioned the public disagreement between Rabbi Gordis and Rabbi Brous: Should we pray for the Palestinians? I would like to say yes. Pray that the Palestinians will change their ways and embrace peace. But that prayer is guilty of being naïve. That prayer is not helpful. That prayer ignores the news of the day:

Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Fatah, and other Palestinian factions coming away from the war with a renewed commitment to arms, to bombs, to mortars, not to peace.

No, sadly, praying for peace is not where we are. Mowing the lawn is where we are. I wondered then how do I end this sermon? After all, we come from a religious tradition which insists on hope and optimism. All of our Haftarot, except for the three before Tisha B' av, always end on an up note. Sometimes the rabbis will even graft an ending from another prophet onto the existing passage, like a toupee, in order to make the Haftarah end with optimism. They famously do this with the Haftarah on Yom Kippur afternoon. Jonah ends on a down note. But the rabbis insist on Haftarot that end on an up note, so they graft some reassuring words from Micah onto Jonah. Given our dreary situation, where is the hope? Where is the Micah onto this Jonah? Where is the up onto this down?

That is where we come in. The up onto this down is our undying love and support for Israel. Barry Shrage, in Southern Israel to bring our love and support, pointed this out on the video feed at the rally Monday night. Israelis believe in the Jewish people. Israelis believe in us, as we believe in them. Witness the 2000 people who attended the rally Monday night. The conflict is intractable. And the neighborhood is bad. But Israel is not alone. It has us. I am going to Jerusalem this summer, to study Torah at Hartman, with as many members of our congregation as possible. What will you do? Shabbat shalom.