

With a Broken Heart
Sermon for *Shabbat Bereshit*

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Said the Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenshtern of Kotzk, Poland, the direct ancestor (it so happens) of our own dear friend, colleague and neighbor, Rabbi Jonathan Morgenshtern of Young Israel of Scarsdale:

אין שלם מלב שבור

There is nothing so whole as a broken heart.

It is a paradox, and yet it is true: we grow more whole when our hearts break, because we grow in compassion, empathy, wisdom, and understanding. When Leonard Cohen sang, “There is a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in,” he conveyed a truth about the human heart as much as about the world.

So much has grown up in the cracks of our broken hearts—mine as much as yours—ever since Hamas terrorists attacked Israel last Shabbat, Saturday, October 7th, on the Festival of Simchat Torah. Through our brokenness we have become more empathic, more emotionally and spiritually connected across great geographical distance. Israelis (and Diaspora Jews) have, by and large, set aside enough differences that have been tearing us apart from within for the last year, in order to stand together, behind a wartime unity

government: a development that we welcome, even if brought about through broken-heartedness.

It is not easy to teach Torah with a broken heart. It's not easy to do *anything* with a broken heart. But Judaism does not summon us to do easy things. Judaism demands that we do hard things, holy things. And when it comes to a Jewish understanding of morality, the Torah provides eternally relevant precepts. So we must learn, teach, and live Torah, even with our broken hearts.

As it so happens, the shedding of innocent blood is one of the first topics that the Torah takes up. When, in this week's *parasha*, *Bereshit*, the very first portion of the Torah, Cain slays his brother Abel, the Torah reports:

וַיֹּאמֶר מַה עָשִׂיתָ קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן־הָאֲדָמָה:

And God said, What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!

In Judaism, to shed innocent blood is a gross affront to God. Even in a world where human justice and compassion are in short supply, the Divine demand for justice and compassion is unrelenting.

Whole families, whole communities, snuffed out in an orgy of violence. 1,300 Israelis murdered. Human beings targeted simply because they were Jews living in the world's only Jewish State. Children butchered in front of their parents and parents in front of their children. Revelers at a desert party gunned down in cold blood.

Our Israeli family members, maimed, tortured, raped—the young, the old, the defenseless and disabled. Jews kidnapped and paraded through the streets of Gaza while onlookers cheered. Some living, terrified; others, already beaten and bullet-hole-ridden corpses.

You know all this and yet we must repeat it, again and again, for the world to hear, to hear that our brothers' blood, our sisters' blood, cries out to God—and to us—from the ground!

Picture Adam and Eve, helpless parents clutching each other when they learn that their boy was slaughtered in an open field, and you will know the heart of every Israeli, every Jew, every person with an even rudimentary grasp of basic morality and human decency.

Unfortunately, just five days in, we're already seeing plenty of folks taking up airtime without a rudimentary grasp of basic morality:

Do not stand for the sophistry of those who want to convince you that the situation is “complicated.”

Do not accept the specious argument that Hamas cares about the lives of Palestinians living in Gaza or the West Bank, or about a two-state solution, or about 1967 borders, or about human rights or freedom—buzzwords and phrases that their defenders casually throw around as they try to turn the conversation away from the unavoidable fact. To wit: Hamas has been crystal clear, in word and in deed, about their motives: to murder and terrorize as many Jews as they can, to shed as much Jewish blood as they can. Not only Israeli blood but *Jewish* blood, targeting us wherever we live.

Do not stay silent when pundits on TV, and your so-called “friends” whom you follow on social media, and your college and high-school classmates, and your elected officials, engage in “both sides-ism,” moral relativism, or rationalize the murder of Jews as the legitimate tactics of a desperate and deprived Palestinian people—which, by and large, they are—or blame Israel for the entirety of Palestinian suffering, or try to link this vicious program on the “occupation.”

No.

There is no moral justification for murder, full stop.

Hamas has announced its intention to avenge “Al Aqsa,” the chief Islamic shrine in Jerusalem, meaning that Hamas sees this as an Islamic Holy War against the Jews and the Jewish State: not against the IDF in the West Bank, or the blockade of Gaza overseen jointly by Israel and its strategic ally Egypt, a Sunni Arab dictatorship that nonetheless does not misconstrue Hamas’s intentions, correctly categorizing Hamas as a terrorist organization in league with the Muslim Brotherhood, and a direct threat to Egypt and the Middle East.

Egypt and Israel know full well what Hamas stands for, and so does the United States, and so do we, as do all people of conscience and unclouded moral vision: Hamas seeks a holy war that will eradicate Jews from the earth. Their charter says as much, in writing.

Do not be seduced by the reductionist, morally relativistic, and intellectually shoddy arguments of those who would analyze this nightmare according to a simple body count, fetishizing “proportionality,” as if morality were simply a game of tit for tat, as if

it would be an acceptable outcome to allow even a single Israeli family to live in terror and trauma in their own country. Would any of us Americans ever accept such an arrangement with a virulent enemy on *our* borders?

As I highlight all of these talking points that we are hearing from those with broken moral compasses, I also want to take a moment to highlight the bravery and moral clarity of other leaders. We applaud the strong and outspoken support of the Biden administration, including the unwavering moral clarity of the President, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.

Earlier this week I spoke with our own New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand who has been an outspoken, compassionate, and supportive ally and who has pledged ongoing support for Israel and for the New York Jewish community, including Westchester Reform Temple. Her words, sent by email just a few hours ago, show us what moral clarity looks like. She writes:

This was a very difficult and tragic week in the wake of Hamas' attack against Israel and the evil atrocities committed against innocent men, women and children. I strongly condemn this unprovoked terrorist attack and stand shoulder to shoulder with Israel and the Jewish community in this moment of tragedy. We share your sorrow and your grief.

We also share your resolve. I will be working hard to make sure that Israel has what it needs to defend itself and support efforts to safely recover hostages, including American citizens, who are being held by Hamas.

Let me make something clear: the United States will support Israel in its efforts to defend itself and its people. This a moment to show the world and our adversaries that the bond between the United States and Israel is unwavering and unbreakable.

I want to thank the Senator's Senior Adviser and Senior Counsel, our congregant Patti Lubin, who is here with us tonight, as well as our congregant, Westchester District Attorney Mimi Rocah, also here in the sanctuary, both of whom have been allies and friends to us all.

And, just this afternoon, I engaged in conversation with a Harvard student who grew up at WRT. He is a student leader who helps to run a speakers' forum, bringing in noted public intellectuals to hold forth on the Harvard campus about pertinent issues. To his dismay, a majority of the student board of the Forum could not agree to publish a statement unanimously condemning Hamas's terror, even as the draft acknowledged the human cost to innocent life, Israeli and Palestinian alike. As an act of principled protest, he and two fellow student leaders resigned from the Forum this afternoon.

All of these leaders are lighting the way, practicing what we preach, living out the values that the Torah teaches.

So let us return to Torah:

קוֹל דְּמֵי אַחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן־הָאֲדָמָה:

Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!

The definitive *midrash* on this verse, *Bereshit Rabbah* 22:9, quoted by Rashi, observes that the word for blood, usually the Hebrew דָּם, “*dam*,” is presented here in the plural, דְּמֵי אַחִיךָ, “*d’mei achicha*,”

literally, “your brother’s *bloods* cry out to me from the ground,” affirming that when Cain slew Abel he also destroyed all possible descendants. The blood of all *potential* life was also on the hands of the murderer.

So the Talmud says, and so we must affirm, that to destroy one life is to destroy an entire world.

And, conversely, to save a life is to save an entire world (*Sanhedrin* 37a).

So let us give thanks for all those Israelis and their allies—the soldiers, civilians, medical workers, volunteers, donors, parents, children, and friends—who have been heroically saving lives, even, for some, at the cost of their own lives. From the moment that gunmen burst into their homes, many of them fending off attackers with whatever makeshift weapons they could find around their house, some with only their bare hands.

Let us give thanks for the brave men and women of the IDF who have been tasked with the unthinkable: to save the lives of those taken hostage while minimizing the loss of innocent lives trapped in the Gaza Strip (despite the cheap price that Hamas places on Palestinian lives).

And let us do now what we must, to save lives, the paramount *mitzvah* of the Jewish tradition.

Our website, wrtemple.org, maintains a regularly updated list of organizations for which we encourage your robust support, placing a

priority on those that are saving lives and providing care for Israelis in harm's way.

WRT's Rabbis' Discretionary Fund provides tens of thousands of dollars of *tzedakah* each year to support our partner organizations in Israel, and, this year, we will be directing our *tzedakah* foremost toward those charities that are saving lives and healing wounds (physical and emotional), including the many incredible Israeli medical facilities and emergency services that work tirelessly to save lives without regard for nationality or creed: Jewish and Muslim lives, Israeli and Palestinian lives alike.

Even as our brothers' and sisters' *bloods* cry out to us from the ground, we must never tarnish our humanity by losing our ability to care about, and for, noncombatant Palestinian lives that have been lost or injured in the war.

Our hearts are broken. Our spirits are not.

Our hearts are broken. Our resolve is not.

Our hearts are broken. Our ability to show compassion is not.

Our hearts are broken.

But our People, the People of Israel, the Jewish People—*We*—are not.

Am Yisrael Chai