

## **Israel tears at my heart**

Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

Ever since the Hamas attack of Oct 7 on Simchat Torah, I have been struggling to understand what transpired, what ensued, and how the war in the Middle East impacts Jews in the United States. When major events happen, I generally strive to study, read, and contemplate in order to get a better understanding. In regards to what has happened in Israel and the current situation, I have to confess that I am not objective and really cannot be. I still struggle with my own emotions, as do you, and I am still trying to unravel the many complex layers to where we are today. And so after many weeks of thinking, reading, and feeling, I believe that today I could offer some personal perspective even as I admit that this is not a well written sermon but more of an attempt to identify many of the problematic issues.

First of all, I have to start with the terror of Oct. 7. This day cannot be minimized by any kind of accounting. Three thousand Hamas terrorists smashed through the border between the Gaza strip and Israel.<sup>1</sup> They attacked thousands of young Israelis, teenagers and those in their twenties, who were at a music concert in the desert. If you can imagine our youth attending a Taylor swift, Billie Eilish, or a Harry Styles concert when thousands of men in fatigues with guns burst through the perimeter. The Israeli young men and women ran for their lives but they were chased and hunted down. When women were caught, they were not just merely killed, but they were raped and brutalized in ways that I will not detail here with you. That day, Hamas terrorists also infiltrated peaceful communities living in kibbutzim.

I was actually there at those kibbutzim 11 months ago along with my rabbinical colleagues. I could see the Gaza border from Kibbutz Aza as I met with Ofir Lipstein, head of the Sha'ar Hanegev Regional Council. As you may remember from my sermon during Rosh Hashanah, he was a second generation kibbutznik and he wanted to improve the lives of Palestinians in Gaza in order to break the cycle of violence. He had a vision of a high tech business center right on the border. It was here that Palestinians could come to work at high paying jobs and bring home their salaries to make their families and communities better off. He proudly told us that he had just obtained a permit from Israel to move this project forward. Furthermore, he shared that he was hoping to build a medical facility so that Palestinians would have access to quality health care.

Ofir was murdered on Oct 7 by Hamas terrorists as he was defending his home and his son's bloodied body was found in a nearby field. That infamous day, children were murdered and their bodies were mutilated by these Hamas 'freedom' fighters. Whole families were burned alive in their homes. Hamas murdered 1200 people that day and then took 240 hostages, ranging in age from 9 months to 86 years. Who takes babies, children, and the elderly hostage? Some of those

taken weren't even Jewish or Israeli. They were citizens of other countries such as Thailand, Germany, France, and even a Palestinian who lived in Jerusalem.

Yosi Klein Halevi, a senior fellow at the Hartman institute in Jerusalem in an interview on NPR along with his Egyptian American writer friend, R.F. Georgy, stated it this way. To paraphrase his words, "While the rest of the world has moved past Oct. 7<sup>th</sup>, Israel hasn't absorbed it. It shattered so many assumptions regarding security and strength. Oct. 7<sup>th</sup> was a death blow to our faith in our ability to defend ourselves where our weakest enemy delivered the worse blow in Israel's history. The premise of Israel is that Jews would never die helpless in this country. Here in this safe refuge, a thousand of our citizens died in a state of helplessness in the most grotesque ways that Jews have been murdered and it happened within the borders of the sovereign Jewish state."<sup>2</sup>

And so to break down Yosi's sentiments is to say that Israel felt helpless to protect her citizens. Yes, there are going to be investigations into how the Israeli government missed the potentially of this attack, how intelligence may have been disregarded and the lack of preparation that could've prevented or mitigated this atrocity. But now, now, you have a country of people who are terrorized. I know this because my Hebrew teacher in Jerusalem, quite some distance from Gaza, Rivka Rosner, described her fears of what she would do in case of a Hamas terror attack at her home. She is the mother of two toddlers, and she has enhanced her safe room and procured weapons to protect her family.

When speaking of the atrocities of Hamas, one must acknowledge the elephant in the room. It is not Hezbollah troops in Lebanon. It is not the Houthi fighters in Yemen. It is not terrorists in Syria. But the common denominator to them all, is Iran. This Islamic republic represses its people, kills women for hair showing under their scarfs, and is the primary funder of Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthi, and Syrian rebels. Iran provides training for the terrorists, funnels money to them, and helps them smuggle in weapons. Iran has stated its desire, for decades, to destroy Israel.<sup>3</sup>

What makes this situation worse is that Hamas, who has ruled the Gaza strip since 2006, as part of its charter clearly states that it wants to obliterate the state of Israel, it rejects all peaceful solutions, and calls upon Muslims to kills Jews anywhere.<sup>4</sup> Hamas leader, Ghazi Hamad, boasts regarding the assault of Oct. 7<sup>th</sup>, that there will be a second, a third, a fourth."<sup>5</sup> And thus between the actions and statements of Iran and Hamas, you get a sense of the emotions in Israel right now and that Israel believes it is fighting an existential battle for its survival.

Yosi Klein HaLevi points out that Israel must maintain a credible military deterrence so that the other enemies of Israel such as Syria, Hezbollah, and Iran don't attack as well. This is why 90% of Israel, he explains, including the left, are supportive of the war in Gaza. I comment

now these days, with immense sadness, that there is nothing left of the Israeli left. They were murdered and kidnapped on Oct. 7<sup>th</sup>.

Thomas Friedman, commentator and analyst in his column on Oct. 14, pointed out that this deterrence actually worked in keeping the border between Lebanon and Israel relatively quiet since 2006. That year Hezbollah crossed the border and killed three and kidnapped two Israeli soldiers. Israel subsequently bombed for 34 days the homes and offices of Hezbollah. Friedman writes that, “The Israeli response was so ferocious that Hezbollah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, said in a now famous interview on Aug. 27, 2006, with Lebanon’s New TV station...: “We did not think, even 1 percent, that the capture [of two Israeli soldiers] would lead to a war at this time and of this magnitude. You ask me, if I had known on July 11 ... that the operation would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not.”<sup>6</sup> Friedman routinely points out that this is not a skirmish between moderate European countries such as Finland and Sweden but rather it’s the Middle East where the crazy tries to out crazy, the crazy.

Thomas Friedman also summarizes on Dec. 29 some of the history of Gaza that is all too often overlooked. He writes, “In September 2005, Ariel Sharon completed a unilateral withdrawal of all Israeli forces and settlements from Gaza, which Israel occupied in the 1967 war. In short order, Hamas began attacking the crossing points between Gaza and Israel to show that even if Israel was gone, the resistance movement wasn’t over; these crossing points were a lifeline for commerce and jobs, and Israel eventually reduced the number of crossings from six to two.” Just take this in for a moment. The reason for restrictions on Gaza was not because of Israeli animus towards the Palestinians, there were instead a direct result of Hamas attacks. Israel limited the entrances and exits into Gaza to prevent Hamas violence.

Back to Friedman, “In January 2006, the Palestinians held elections ...the more disciplined Hamas ran carefully targeted slates and managed to win the parliamentary majority. Hamas then faced a critical choice: Now that it controlled the Palestinian parliament, it could work within the Oslo Accords and the Paris protocol that governed economic ties between Israel, Gaza and the West Bank — or not.”

Friedman writes, “Hamas chose not to —..Had Hamas embraced Oslo..., not only would the world have lined up to aid and invest in it; it would have been the most powerful springboard conceivable for a Palestinian state in the West Bank, in the heart of the Palestinian ancestral homeland. Palestinians would have proved to themselves, to Israelis and to the world what they could do when they had their own territory. But Hamas decided instead to make Gaza a springboard for destroying Israel.”<sup>7</sup>

I am not going to make the argument that all that Israel is doing is right or that it will accomplish its goals of eradicating Hamas and ensuring its security. My son Shane makes some valid arguments that Israel is merely perpetuating the cycle of violence and new generation will

rise up committed to fighting Israel. I am, as you remember from my sermon on Rosh Hashanah, highly critical of the extreme right wing government led by Benjamin Netanyahu. I am offended by racist remarks of Betzalel Smotich and Itamar Ben Gvir. And I want this government to fall and for there to be new elections and God willing, a more centrist government to rule in Israel.

I also find my heart breaking at the immense suffering of Palestinian civilians in Gaza. They lack clean water, food, and medical care. In the interview between Yosi Klein Halevi, his Egyptian American friend, Georgy asserts that Palestinians feel that they are disposable and he calls for empathy for both sides. He admonishes that we need to recognize the humanity of the other. Georgy also warns about the limits of digital media that easily spread misinformation, lies, and alternative facts. Both Georgy and HaLevi appreciate their friendship and believe that as writers they can look beyond their own perspectives to hopefully work towards a shared interlocking narrative. Their friendship is a ray of hope in the midst of such turmoil.

To make this conflict in the Middle East even worse is to see how it has affected life for us. News coming out of Gaza and Israel is roiling the US, in the streets, highways, college campuses and families. For me, it has been disheartening to see the protests on college campuses and the inability of Ivy League presidents before congress to condone genocide against Jews. Seeing an image on Black lives Matter of a paraglider immediately after the Oct. 7<sup>th</sup> attack was horrific. One of my colleagues is disgusted with a number of progressive organizations that he has participated in because they were unable to condemn the Hamas terrorist attack.

Burton Swain wrote a fascinating article in the WSJ on Dec. 20 entitled, “How ‘Antiracism’ Becomes Antisemitism.” Swain describes in the past that antisemitism came from a need to blame someone for the failures of the government. This played out in Russia in the 1880’s, the dissemination of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, Germany after WWI, and etc.

He writes, “For several years a variety of academics and writers had argued that Jews are “white” or “functionally white” or “white passing.” “White,” in this usage, has nothing to do with national or religious identity or genetic characteristics. It signifies allegedly unjust privilege and legacies of oppression. Calling Jews “white” was a way of depriving them of any cover as a racial minority and classifying them with persecutors and exploiters.”

Swain continues, “As Liel Leibovitz writes in a 2021 essay for Commentary magazine: “The creative genius of Jew-hatred has always been its ability to imagine the Jew as the embodiment of whatever it is that polite society finds repulsive. That’s why Jews were condemned as both nefarious bankers controlling all the world’s money and shiftily revolutionaries imperiling all capital; as both sexless creeps and oversexed lechers coming for the women and the girls; as both pathetically powerless and occultly powerful. . . . And if you decide that there’s such a thing as ‘whites’ and that they are uniquely responsible for all evils perpetrated on the innocent and

downtrodden, well, the Jews must be not only of them but nestled comfortably at the top of the white-supremacist pyramid...The left needed real scapegoats...

What about the Jews? Successful, capitalist, hated by much of the Arab and Muslim world, the Jews—especially Israeli Jews but Jews generally—met the need for a blameworthy Bad People.”<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Marc Dollinger, professor at San Francisco State, opened up my mind years ago to how the Jews have been viewed as other, non-white, and then white. Historically, there were immigration limitations on Jews from Eastern Europe. There were strict quotas on Jews attending college. We weren't allowed to be part of country clubs, stay at certain hotels, go to summer camp, and etc. We weren't white. And yet later on, we were considered white and now so white that antisemitism against us is minimized and we are blamed for Israel's actions and inactions. So much so as Swain writes, “The heads of three top universities, testifying before a congressional committee, couldn't explain why their institutions prosecute every perceived offense against other minorities but can't condemn calls for genocide against Jews.”<sup>8</sup>

It is understandable that we feel under siege. But as I remind others and my colleagues, there's a lot of hate to go around. There's hatred towards blacks, Asians, Hispanics, gay, lesbian and Trans, and towards Muslims. How terrible it was when a Muslim 6 year old boy was stabbed to death in IL by his landlord and three Palestinian American college students were shot in Vermont. I condemn these terrible acts. They are wholly unacceptable to anyone with a conscience and to anyone who cares about our country. And even as I fear for Israel's survival, my heart goes out to the distress of the displaced population in Gaza. I want their suffering to end. I want these poor people to have not only the necessities of life but hope for a bright future for themselves and their children.

Mishneh Sanhedrin 4:5, teaches that on we are created by God. It says, “

וּמִפְּנֵי שְׁלוֹם הַבְּרִיּוֹת, שֶׁלֹּא יֹאמַר אָדָם לַחֲבֵירוֹ אָבִא גָדוֹל מֵאַבְיָךְ

This translates as, “And for the sake of peace among peoples, that a person will not say to his fellow, ‘my father is greater than your father.’ When a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to one another. But the supreme king of kings, the Holy One stamped all people with the seal of Adam the first, and not one of them is similar to another. There each and every person is obligated to say, ‘The world was created for me.’

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank are created in the image of God. Our fellow Americans in this country whom we profoundly disagree with are created in the same mold as us. We are all human beings with our own stories, experiences, fears and hopes. We need empathy for the other. Our humanity depends on it and our relationships hinges on this as well. It seems like we need now more than ever the ability to anchor ourselves and see the good in others even when we are angry, even when we are hurt.

This is a hard time for us, for our country, for Israel and for the world. Let us pray for the war in the Middle East to end quickly with long lasting security for Israel, a rebuilding of Gaza for the Palestinians, a containment of Iran, for understanding to take the place of antisemitism and other forms of hate, and for us to recover, renew our relationships with one another. And may God give us strength, patience, kindness, compassion, and empathy as we continue to navigate these tumultuous times.

**Notes:**

1 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-estimates-3000-hamas-terrorists-invaded-israel-in-oct-7-onslaught/>

2 <https://www.kpcc.org/2023-12-20/the-unexpected-friendship-between-an-arab-and-israeli-writer>

**Yossi Klein Halevi**, Israeli writer and a senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute. His latest book is called Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor. Author of the op-ed The lonely people of history, published in The Times of Israel.

**R.F. Georgy**, Egyptian-American author. His novel, Absolution: A Palestinian Israeli Love Story, is slated to be adapted to film by Israeli director Eran Riklis. Author of the op-ed The disposable people of history, published in The Times of Israel.

3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/01/world/middleeast/iran-israel-hamas.html>

4 <https://embassies.gov.il/holysee/AboutIsrael/the-middle-east/Pages/The%20Hamas-Covenant.aspx#:~:text=The%20Hamas%20charter%20is%20the,18%20years%20of%20its%20existence.>

5 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-official-says-group-aims-to-repeat-oct-7-onslaught-many-times-to-destroy-israel/>

6 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/14/opinion/international-world/israel-hamas-war.html>

7 Thomas Friedman- history of Hamas and how it affected Gaza strip.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/29/opinion/israel-hamas-war.html>

8 Article WSJ Dec, 30 by Barton Swain- How Antiracism' becomes Antisemitism- to explain what is happening on college campuses, streets of cities, and progressive left.

9 Sanhedrin 4:5

**And for peace among people, so that one person will not say to another: My father, i.e., progenitor, is greater than your father. ..**

**And this serves to tell of the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, as when a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, stamped all people with the seal of Adam the first, and not one of them is similar to another. Therefore, since all humanity descends from one person, each and every person is obligated to say: The world was created for me, as one person can be the source of all humanity, and recognize the significance of his actions. The court says to the witnesses:**