

Rabbi Ken Chasen
“We, We Do Not Know”
Leo Baeck Temple
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It certainly was not planned with any of us here in America in mind – but what a relief it is that the cessation of hostilities in the Israel-Hamas War coincided exactly with our Thanksgiving weekend. Could there be any greater reason for giving thanks than the sight of the first group of Israeli hostages returning to their loved ones and this blessed oasis from the relentless images of violence, brutality and agony for so many innocent people that have plagued us all for the past month and a half?

For the past seven weeks, every day we have been witnessing the steady shattering of almost everything we thought we knew about being a part of the Jewish people in this day and age.

We saw a bludgeoning of innocent Israelis that was more gruesome than anything we had ever imagined, wider in scope and success than either our enemies or our Israeli siblings ever conceived of being possible.

We remembered our misery when Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was abducted by Hamas in 2006 and held captive for five years... and we multiplied that misery by 240, as we saw not only soldiers but children, elderly women and men, mothers with their babies, whole families taken hostage and stashed away underground by blood-lusting terrorists. We were forced to grapple with the impossibility of what it would take to recover 240 people held by a militant force that honors none of humanity’s established rules for waging war justly.

We watched an endless array of American progressive groups – groups with whom we had worked side by side for the widest range of social justice causes – respond to the butchering, incineration, decapitation and capture of Jews with a mixture of silence, tortured wordsmithing, and outright support for the butchers. It was soul robbing to see assumed friends look upon our people’s executioners as liberators and condone their barbarism against our people as deserved.

We witnessed the widespread rise of an antisemitism we had convinced ourselves was a thing of the past. We saw the return of the most tired tropes of those who hate Jews – only this time, they weren’t only being spoken by those we know to be white supremacists; they tumbled with impunity from the mouths of those who purport to care about humanity’s refuse... except when humanity’s refuse are Jews, who appear to be disqualified from such care.

We saw literally millions all over the world, including here in the U.S. and including quite a number of Jews, join in the familiar chorus of declaring Israel to be unworthy of existence – to be a white settler colonialist enterprise... an attack that is as antisemitic as it is ignorant. For the record, the majority of Israeli Jews are not even white-presenting, much less white – they come from Middle Eastern countries where they were forced to flee for their lives because they are Jews. At precisely the moment when it couldn't have been more obvious why the existence of Israel was not only warranted but absolutely necessary as a matter of life and death for the world's Jews, this is when millions the world over responded to Israel's self-defense following a civilian massacre with the assertion that Israel should be wiped off the face of the planet. And now we routinely hear that the Jews are committing genocide – in a legal war of self-defense against an enemy whose declared desire to commit genocide against the world's Jews is in writing, and is repeated habitually in the media, and meets with faint if any condemnation.

We also watched and winced as the Israel Defense Forces, the military charged with protecting the place of Jews on the planet, engaged in a war whose results are naturally sickening our souls. Anyone looking at the violent deaths of thousands of Palestinian children, among others, and not feeling physically and soulfully undone has already become yet another of Hamas's victims. To look upon this kind of suffering dispassionately is to surrender one's own heart and spirit. It is to declare, "Hamas has taken power over me, over my sensibilities. They want to reduce the world to pitiless terror – and I am ready to oblige them." One need not... must not... abandon all semblances of humanity in order to support Israel's war of self-defense. Israelis are in the streets demanding that the war be fought justly, in accordance with international law – we, speaking from the safety of half a world away, where hyperbole is shopped without consequence, can do no less.

And speaking of hyperbole, we have mourned the demise of the final vestiges of civil discourse. In an era in which every self-appointed expert posts and reposts their preferred version of the "truth" without even bothering to verify accuracy so long as the words and images really bite and sting, our brains are swimming in a cesspool of misinformation, wielded like a deadly weapon against our shared humanity. We are drowning in that cesspool, watching even our own families and friendships descend into futility. We have become the very machines that Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk and the rest have sought to create. We rail against bloodshed and demand peace... by choosing our side in the war, thereby perpetuating and deepening it by refusing to demand anything from the party we have ruled not guilty.

And this is why we are so thoroughly drained. For the past seven weeks, every day we have been witnessing the steady shattering of almost everything we thought we

knew about being a part of the Jewish people in this day and age. And yet our Torah is here, as always, to remind us humbly that we never actually knew as much as we thought.

Just seven verses into this week's Torah portion, our ancestor Jacob, who will go on to become our collective namesake by taking the name Israel, awakens from his famous desert dream, in which he sees a ladder with angels of God going up and down it. He hears the renewal of the promise first spoken to his grandfather, Abraham – that his people will have a place on this Earth, that his descendants will share in that future and be numerous, and that together, they will be a blessing to the world. He awakens filled with that vision, and in a moment of awe, he speaks words that have been much interpreted by our sages across the centuries: “*Achen yesh Adonai bamakom hazeh, v'anochi lo yadati*” – “Truly, the Eternal One is in this place, and I, I did not know it.”

I didn't repeat the word “I” there by mistake. The Hebrew is written in something of a peculiar manner in this Torah text. Hebrew speakers know that *anochi lo yadati* is somewhat redundant... it could have just said *lo yadati*, and it would have meant, “I did not know it.” Adding *anochi* is obviously intentional, as something of a point of emphasis. The question is: What is being emphasized?

I have studied many interpretations over the years, but none that speaks more directly to this moment, this painful year in which we encounter this episode in the Torah with new and troubled eyes, than this teaching by an 18th century scholar, Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz, who wrote the following in his commentary, *Panim Yafot*: “When can we experience God's nearness? Only when we are suffused by ‘I don't know’ – when we ourselves know that we do not know... and do not pretend to have wisdom and insight” that, in truth, we do not have.

Might the biblical Israel have been signposting something to *Am Yisrael* – to us, the people of Israel – at this unprecedented time in our shared story? Might that extra *anochi* – that added emphasis that is very deliberately injected into this sentence in the Torah – be an emphasis on the humility and the spiritual strength that comes with saying the words that so few people are finding the wisdom and courage to muster in this moment... in saying truthfully, “I don't know?”

When I speak with my rabbi friends, not a one of them relishes the responsibility that comes with having to speak publicly and frequently about this defining moment in Jewish history. There is such a great chance, at every moment, of being wrong... and having the record demonstrate just how wrong we were as Jewish leaders when it counted the most. If it doesn't cause you to quake at least a little bit before opening your mouth, there's truly something wrong.

If only the noisy, angry world in which we live would quake for a moment or two before speaking hatred, forwarding hatred, posting hatred, multiplying hatred in ways that

only reverberate off the surfaces of human souls and boomerang back to cause us harm and danger. If only we, as a human family, could recognize the obviousness of how uncertain we actually are about everything we are speaking out into space with such absolute and misguided confidence.

On this Shabbat evening, I want to give voice to a lot of things that I, I do not know. These are things that you don't know either, even if you think you do.

I don't know whether Hamas can be eliminated as a power in Gaza, no matter how long this war, soon to be resumed, lasts... no matter how many innocent people die in the name of achieving that righteous objective. Yes, I see what the United States military did to pulverize Al Qaeda and ISIS into submission – and with a very queasy stomach, I am forced to admit that it worked. It worked... at the cost of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives.

We all know more than we wish we did about the civilian death toll in Afghanistan, where America had a legitimate terrorist enemy in Al Qaeda. But less known is the full depth of the destruction our military did in Syria, and also in Iraq, where there were no weapons of mass destruction after all, to relieve us from the danger of ISIS, which rightly terrified us so greatly about ten years ago. Between 2014 and 2019 alone, in the effort to drive ISIS out of Syria and Iraq, the United States dropped approximately 112,000 bombs and missiles. Yes, they were sophisticated, targeted weapons. And yes, so are Israel's. And yes, thousands and thousands of innocent farmers and families lost their lives to remove the fear of ISIS from our lips, from our lives.

Those who say so confidently that Hamas cannot, under any circumstance, be brought to its knees, need to read a history book of just the past ten years. And those who say so confidently that Israel *can* bring Hamas to its knees – that it can do so militarily, that it will have the sustained support of the United States in doing so, that the world will tolerate Israel dropping 112,000 bombs when it's only Jews that Hamas wants to annihilate, that *we* can and should tolerate the amount of innocent life that will be lost in order to achieve that just military goal – they are confident of something that they, they do not know... because it cannot be known.

Another thing I do not know – even if Hamas can be eliminated as a ruling power in Gaza, I do not know what will happen next there, and neither does the IDF, because it's impossible to know. That doesn't diminish in the slightest the fact that Hamas earned its own extinction back when it was brutally killing and oppressing its own people just to seize power from the Palestinian Authority in Gaza via a coup. And certainly their out-loud plan to exterminate the Jewish people, wherever they may be, more than explains Israel's just determination to destroy them. But unless we Jews, both in Israel and around the world, are prepared to demand Israeli leadership that will demonstrate the courage

necessary to bring a neighboring state of Palestine into being after all of this carnage, we need to display some proper humility before the giant open question of “what comes next.” We, we do not know.

And while we’re on the subject of things we don’t know – I am grateful all the way down to my soul for this temporary truce, and I love, as you do, the first groups of hostages returning home as they are. And I do not know whether this pause in hostilities will actually benefit the suffering Palestinians in the long run, much less the terrified Israelis. I don’t actually know if more or fewer innocent people will ultimately lose their lives *because* of this break in the bloodbath.

Wars of necessity are always clouded with such uncertainties. The argument about the horrific death toll of civilian populations in Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki continues to this day. Some will call these attacks the worst war crimes in human history. Others suggest, with reasonable data to back them up, that had these attacks not happened, still more innocent people would have died over the long continuation of World War II. My guess is that each one of you has a pretty strong feeling about which side of that argument is correct. And the painful reality is that you have no idea whether your strong feeling is justified or not. You don’t know if you’re right about it, and there’s no way to find out.

So maybe the biblical Israel was trying to tell us something when he lingered on saying “I, I do not know.” Maybe we can resist the impulse to contribute unwittingly to a world awash in rancor and venom, so much of which is landing squarely upon us Jews in this time of such harrowing consequence.

There is nowhere to hide from the moral demand of this chapter of our lives. Each one of us is trying our best to guess what’s right... an educated guess, but a guess nonetheless... and to base our speech, our donations, our activism, our posture in the world on that guess. It is no mystery why we prefer to pretend that we know the answers to questions as agonizing as these. Certainty, even if it’s manufactured, is a warm blanket designed to protect us from moral doubt. If I say that anything Israel does to defend itself is automatically just, I don’t have to wrestle with those images of dying Palestinians. If I say that everything Israel does to defend itself is automatically unjust, I get to hide behind my zeal to disavow any soulful responsibility for those dying Palestinians... and I get to kick the can down the road about the question that I know can never be answered: “Was there actually a better way? A better way that could truly be achieved? Or did my hunger to point my finger at somebody else... anybody else... for the suffering of the innocent Gazans assign to me soulful responsibility I cannot flee for all the dying to come – the Jewish dying – if Hamas is left to continue its work on ending the Jewish people?

Anochi lo yadati – I, I do not know. And neither do you.

We can be among the few to hold that humble truth in the way we choose to be in this world in this moment.

We can be among the few who won't dehumanize those who do not see all of this as we do. There is a whole lot of destruction emerging from the false binary that is being foisted upon us – of choosing sides, when the only real and lasting solution for these two tortured peoples will be when this world chooses both sides.

We can be among the few who will not seek the heart's harbor of distancing ourselves from the consequences of this war. That is to say, there is no backing of Israel right now that somehow absolves us of holding the pain that support is creating in thousands of real Palestinian lives. Saying that "we, we do not know" is saying that "we won't lie about the moral ambiguities of this war, even as we know it must be fought... that we won't anesthetize ourselves from bearing the burden of what is happening to those caught in the middle... that we won't let Hamas take power over our senses, that we won't join them in their callous disregard over the destruction of the innocent."

It is much easier, much more attractive, to say, "I know." Everybody does it nowadays, even when they literally know nothing. There are people chanting "From the River to the Sea" who couldn't find Palestine on a map. And there are loyalists of Israel's war who know nothing and care nothing of the displacement of the Palestinian people, without which the modern Jewish state could never have come to be. Saying we know when we don't tends to radicalize us. Saying we don't know – we think... we feel... but we just might be wrong – presents the possibility of humanizing us... and then us humanizing others, just as it was promised to the biblical Israel way back in this week's Torah portion: "Through you and your descendants all the families of the Earth shall find blessing."

May we make it so.