



Rabbi Ken Chasen
“The Stained Canvas of Morality”
Leo Baeck Temple
November 3, 2023
Shabbat Vayera 5784

The suffering we are all witnessing and experiencing... it all begins in this week’s Torah portion.

Abraham and Sarah – the first generation of the Jewish story, the names we chanted moments ago in prayer – were struggling to have a child. Sarah was in agony, fearing that she would be the reason God’s promise to Abraham to father a great nation wouldn’t be realized. So she offered her handmaiden, an Egyptian slave named Hagar, to her husband Abraham as a concubine.

It is no surprise that practically from the moment Hagar conceived a child, tensions arose between the two women. Soon, life for Hagar alongside Sarah became unbearable. And when, miraculously, Sarah became pregnant as an old woman, giving birth to a son of her own – Isaac, whose name we also prayed just minutes ago – the unbearable became truly unlivable.

Sarah begged Abraham to send Hagar and her son away. Abraham resisted this fate for his first son. And God, we are told, interceded, promising Abraham that he could let Hagar and her son go, for they, too, would be the progenitors of a great nation, just as Isaac would be. Two discrete peoples, emerging from one family and one land.

And so Hagar and her son, Ishmael, were sent away. And he did become the progenitor of his own people, as did Isaac. And those two peoples are still warring over their place on that same piece of land.

To be trapped as we are as Jews, in that same fight, foretold with precision in the Torah, is to live an agony unlike any most of us have ever known. This is, without a doubt, the most agonizing moment of my career as a rabbi – a rabbinate that has included serving a New York congregation when 9/11 happened, guiding our temple through the fire that destroyed our hillside and outdoor chapel and nearly engulfed our entire campus, and supporting our community through a worldwide pandemic that destroyed so many lives and families and all of our mental health. Those moments brought exhaustion and fear and loneliness. This one adds a measure of despair, an inner battle with the onset of futility, that many of us have never experienced before.

That inner battle arises from our paralysis before the question of morality. We are, each of us, reaching in desperation for what is moral in this moment, and we are coming up wanting... because the clarity for which we hunger is a mere illusion.

Some of you may remember my personal mentor in matters of morality and Jewish justice, because he taught so many of our Israel travel groups over the years, and because I brought him to LBT for a full weekend as our Scholar-in-Residence in early 2005. He was a rabbi by the name of David Forman, whose memory is a blessing that only continues to grow in my life.

David was the founder of an Israeli organization named Rabbis for Human Rights. You are familiar with these folks, because they're the unbelievably brave souls you see standing defiantly in front of Israeli bulldozers to prevent them from destroying Palestinian homes in the occupied West Bank. Rabbis for Human Rights, indeed... they routinely put their bodies on the line in a way that even the most courageous activists among us have never dared to attempt, all to animate the very best of our Jewish values.

David was born in America and made Aliyah as a young man filled with the visionary humane ideals that led so many to the Israeli kibbutzim and into the work of building a just world for all. Of course, his early years as an Israeli would necessarily also include military service, and during his weekend as our Scholar-in-Residence, he told a story from his time in the IDF.

He recalled serving as the commander of a tank battalion in the First Lebanon War in 1982. He had received his orders to lead his men into a battle in southern Lebanon. When they arrived, everything was exactly as the military intelligence had indicated. There were the terrorists, and there were the human shields deliberately placed in front of them. And David was left to decide – do I order my men to fire? If I have them fire, we will absolutely kill innocent people. If I have them hold their fire, it is all but certain that one or more of us will be killed. There is no time to decide. What should I do?

David chose not to reveal the decision he made. Instead, he placed the dilemma before us. What would you do?

The first person to raise their hand said something to the effect of: “I would have worked very hard to ensure that neither I nor anybody else would ever be in such a situation.” The evasion met with open snickering. The next few people offered that they would hold their fire, since they could not conscience killing innocent people, even in service of a worthy military goal. For them, that was a clear moral line that could not be crossed.

After this strand of the conversation gained some momentum, our temple's past president Mark Levy, of very blessed memory, raised his hand. Mark, I knew, had served

as a tank commander in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II. David called on Mark, and he said, “They should all be court martialed. Anyone who ordered the men in the tanks to hold their fire should be court martialed and imprisoned. The time to decide not to follow the order to lead that battalion on this mission was before the mission, not during it. If you want to be a conscientious objector, that is a fair moral stance to take – and you should be prepared to accept the consequences that come with taking it. But to accept the mission and then refuse to fulfill it is to ensure that other soldiers, who placed their lives in your hands, will die. Will the morality of your refusal to order fire hold up when you are explaining to their spouses, to their parents, to their children, why their father is dead?”

Now, by this point, I was barely breathing – and wondering if my young rabbinat at Leo Baeck Temple was on life support. And that’s when Rabbi David Forman, the founding Rabbi for Human Rights, knew he had achieved his goal with this exchange. He said, “I didn’t tell you this story to reveal the ‘right answer’ – that is, to reveal what I did in that situation, although I’m perfectly willing to tell any of you who would like to know. I told the story to demonstrate something about morality that most people don’t want to accept.

“You see, most of us want morality to be about choosing between right and wrong. But I have learned that moral choices are never between right and wrong – because right and wrong is easy. You do what’s right. Moral choices are between right and right... and between wrong and wrong. It is wrong to open fire and kill those innocent Lebanese civilians. And it is wrong to hold fire and rob an Israeli family of a loved one who courageously put his life on the line for his family and his people. It is right to kill terrorists who declare their genocidal intent, along with their preference to die instead of negotiating a peaceful solution. And it is right to preserve the lives of innocent people trapped by a regime that weaponizes their deaths.”

Morality, taught Rabbi Forman, is about choosing how to navigate the real world, not the simple world we prefer to imagine. It’s about living in the world where we won’t even fully know whether the choice we made was moral. The world where we will struggle forever with the decision we made, principled though it might have been, because the matter so obviously defies moral clarity.

Rabbi Forman’s visit to Leo Baeck Temple changed my life. I never thought about morality the same way ever again. And in some ways, I suppose he was preparing me – all of us – for this moment, even though I’m quite certain this is a moment he never imagined could actually happen. What do we do with the refrain, “Never again,” now that it *has* happened again?

Recognizing what morality actually is, in contrast to the moralizing that has devoured us all on social media – the tribalist certainty of those who are poisoning this

world for Jews and Muslims right now by declaring that one party to this conflict is pristinely right while the other is conveniently solely to blame – I am forced look upon the choices before us and see right vs. right, wrong vs. wrong.

This, I know, means that I am likely to disappoint and probably even anger most of you tonight. Because the answers I see, at this time so filled with questions, are not satisfying. They do not relieve the soul's thirst for absolution. They leave me wondering if I'm even right for saying them – not only if you will question their veracity now or someday, but if even I will. But we have spoken far too many times in this sanctuary about the indefensibility of silence. That is a theme you can't miss if you've breathed the air in here for any period of time. So I cannot choose silence, but I will not choose a side and damn the consequences.

Anyone who is telling you “level the place,” no matter what the cost is in innocent Palestinian life, may believe sincerely that that is how peace will finally be achieved in Israel/Palestine. And anyone who is telling you that Zionism is racism – that Jews are settler colonialists who have no entitlement to live in self-sovereignty on land that once belonged to Jews but now must be returned solely to the Palestinian people – may believe sincerely that that is how peace will finally be achieved. Both speak passionately of peace and liberation and dignity. And both are interested not in peace, but in victory – in “right” vanquishing “wrong.” To them, I say: look, if you will, at the bloody result of treating this conflict as a matter of right vs. wrong.

Any party – Jewish or Palestinian – who does not acknowledge that both Jews and Palestinians have a historic claim upon this land is in fact anti-peace... is only masquerading as a peace partner. Anyone who defines “ending the occupation” as returning to a world in which Jews live on Earth at the mercy of other powers that have sought to destroy us for almost two millennia is only masquerading as a peace partner – and will succeed only in intensifying the bloodshed, not reducing it. The same goes for those Jews who dispute the Palestinian claim upon the land; they cause war, not peace.

What Hamas has done – and promises to continue to do – is not any part of the cause of liberating Palestinians... any more than those Jews who dream of annexing the West Bank and ending the vision of a Palestinian state alongside Israel are advancing the cause of Jews living in safety and security. Both sides are right. And wrong. Which leaves us in the terrible bind Rabbi Forman faced in that tank. Do we fire or hold our fire?

As you might imagine, a number of my closest interfaith friends and partners have been in dialogue with me about this in recent days. They are desperate to put an end to war, an end to the atrocity of hundreds of Palestinian children dying every single day. Who among us isn't? So it is no surprise that they are calling for a ceasefire, as are a small number of those in the Jewish community as well.

Guided by Rabbi Forman's lesson that morality is never as easy as we would wish it to be, I want to suggest to my interfaith friends that there are a few moral questions that those demanding a ceasefire must answer:

First... do you believe that there is any realistic hope that either Hamas or the IDF, much less both, will actually do what you are calling upon them to do? I understand how it might feel satisfying to the conscience to call for no more war, but if there is no chance whatsoever that either warring party would even consider what you are demanding, what is the moral import of a call for something that we know is not going to happen – beyond helping the person making the call to feel relief from their agony over what they are and will continue to be seeing?

Second... most of my interfaith friends will acknowledge that the call for a ceasefire in Gaza will be manipulated, weaponized as fuel for antisemitism, even as they would obviously wish for that not to happen. And I think they are right. Unless they are willing to hold Hamas at least as accountable for the dying Gazan children as Israel, anyone viewing their actions will certainly see them as an impugning uniquely of the Jews – and that type of rhetoric has already led to a 400% increase in anti-Jewish hate acts in America over this same time last year. I don't have to tell you about the security measures adopted at Leo Baeck Temple since October 7, both because local law enforcement recommends them for our safety and because no Jew would set foot in our synagogue without them. To my interfaith friends, I ask: Does this raise any questions for you about the morality of a call for a ceasefire that has no chance of actually bringing a ceasefire, but absolutely *will* result in the targeting of your Jewish friends?

Third... if you are a proponent of an immediate ceasefire, and you'd like me to dream with you that a ceasefire is somehow possible, let's play out that possibility. Israel ceases its military campaign, and... what happens then? I assume you'd be willing to agree that Hamas very publicly declares victory and retains its stranglehold over the helpless, suffering people of Gaza. Are you imagining that with Hamas still in power right next door, the Israeli government will *loosen* the conditions of the occupation? Or would you be willing to acknowledge that conditions for Gazans will naturally be much, much worse going forward than they were on October 6 and before? And if you can acknowledge that, are you planning to withhold criticism from Israel when Gazans are suffering because of those conditions? Because if you aren't, why would Israel even consider gratifying your desire for a ceasefire... only to continue being solely blamed for the suffering of Gazans, while the danger to Jewish lives from Hamas will have been left intact?

Fourth... to my interfaith partners demanding a ceasefire on moral grounds – if none of this so far has caused you to reconsider the moral consequences of asking Israelis simply to return to life with a proudly and publicly declared genocidal regime as its next-

door neighbor, perhaps this will help you to understand why Israelis won't consider a ceasefire for even a millisecond. On October 24th, Ghazi Hamad of the Hamas political bureau was interviewed on Lebanese television. The video clip and transcript are readily available. Here's what he said: "Israel is a country that has no place on our land. We must remove that country, because it constitutes a security, military, and political catastrophe to the Arab and Islamic nation, and must be finished. We are not ashamed to say this, with full force. We must teach Israel a lesson, and we will do this again and again. (This)... is just the first time, and there will be a second, a third, a fourth, because we have the determination, the resolve, and the capabilities to fight. Will we have to pay a price? Yes, and we are ready to pay it. We are called a nation of martyrs, and we are proud to sacrifice martyrs. The occupation must come to an end."

To which the news anchor asks: "Occupation where? In the Gaza strip?"

"No, I am talking about all the Palestinian lands," replies Hamad.

"Does that mean the annihilation of Israel?" asks the news anchor.

"Yes, of course," replies Hamad. "The existence of Israel is illogical. The existence of Israel is what causes all that pain, blood, and tears... Therefore, nobody should blame us for the things we do. On October 7, October 10, October 1,000,000 – everything we do is justified."

To my interfaith friends, I ask you to watch this interview and then take a soulful pause and ask yourself: Is it morally upright for me to ask my Jewish friends, who have as rightful a historical claim to live in self-sovereignty upon this land as the Palestinians do, to let this man and his associates continue to massacre them... a million times if necessary... because 'the annihilation of Israel' is their only satisfactory outcome? Do you see a negotiated solution between the Jews and the Palestinians to share the land – a solution in which an Israel in some form continues to exist – happening with this man and his kind as the representatives of the Palestinians? Truly? Because if you don't, the call for a ceasefire is a call for genocide against the Jews. The call for a ceasefire isn't a choice to save children. It's a choice of whose children should die, and the choice you're making is: the Jewish ones.

It is unsettling to hear these words coming out of my mouth at all, much less in front of a microphone. But we are talking about an organization that has said in front of every microphone it could find, with little apparent negative consequence for 35 straight years, that its goal is to murder all Jews... including you and me. Does that prospect cause you to struggle with the morality of a call for a ceasefire in Gaza?

I'm not remembering any interfaith campaign calling for an end to Hamas to rival that of the clarion call for an end to Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership, which the Jews in

Israel and the United States, including me and so many of you, have robustly joined. Will our interfaith friends join us in making the demand for an end to Hamas as vociferously as we will?

Many of you know about my work with an organization by the name of T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. I am a recent chair of its board, and I still serve as one of its directors. 2,300 North American rabbis and cantors are formally connected to T'ruah because it offers a principled path that supports the Jewish quest not to be exterminated while rejecting the "Israel, right or wrong" advocates who prefer to lie about Israel's fair portion of the responsibility for the deadly status quo between these two peoples. Last week, 700 rabbis and cantors signed onto T'ruah's response to the crisis in Israel and Gaza.

The T'ruah response disappointed the "level the place" crowd by calling on Israel to fight its just war justly, in accordance with international law, and by calling for a humanitarian corridor for critical supplies to enter Gaza, and for the international community to take responsibility for policing that corridor to ensure that the aid goes to the suffering civilians, not to Hamas. It also called for prioritizing the release of the 240 petrified souls who we have honored in light tonight, for I don't think any one of us can stomach imagining what is going on in their lives at this very second, as we labor over these dreadful matters amid safety and beauty.

T'ruah's statement was, however, equally disappointing to the ceasefire crowd – but there's a reason we rabbis chose to let them down, a reason that is hard for anyone who isn't Jewish to access. The reason is that it's not unheard of, but it's rare to find a rigid Jewish pacifist... and that's because if World War II, God awful as it was, hadn't been fought and won by the Allies, you and I wouldn't be having this conversation, because I never would have been born. My parents would have died as children when the Nazis, without the resistance of military might, completed their solving of "the Jewish problem" by taking over the world. They had already taken over all of Europe before the Allies began to push them back... not through negotiation, but through force.

Force is ugly. Grotesque. Wrong. I hate it as much as you do. But I'm a Jew, and I know I'd be dead without it. Talk about a choice between wrong and wrong, right and right.

This doesn't make me a war monger. It makes me someone who won't pretend he doesn't value his own kids' lives as much as he values all children, wherever they may live. I'm not sure if you would refuse to physically defend yourself and your family if someone came to your door looking to kill you or a loved one, God forbid – but this is the kind of thing Jews have no choice but to think about.

Does that sound hyperbolic to you? Maybe we should ask the Jewish peace activists who live nearest to Gaza and somehow managed to survive the baby-incinerating, senior citizen-decapitating rampage they just witnessed.

Answers that are unsatisfying, that do not relieve the soul's thirst for absolution. Answers that leave me wondering if I'm even right for saying them. But if silence isn't an option, the stained canvas of morality is all I can attempt in humility to offer. Join me, with your heavy heart, in painting that canvas of wrong and wrong, right and right, with the colors that stand the best possible chance one day, may it not be long off, of enabling peace to breathe free.