

## **They Are Not Animals—and Neither Are We**

**Rabbi A. Brian Stoller**

**Parashat Noach 5784 / October 20, 2023**

These last couple weeks since Hamas's unspeakably, horrific, terrorist attacks against Israel have been so hard for the Jewish community.

I know several members of our community whose family members were murdered by Hamas—and sadly, there are probably more. I know of one IDF soldier—an American from Long Island, who went to Schechter with kids from our congregation—who was taken hostage.

Many other TBE members have children, grandchildren, cousins, aunts, uncles, and friends in Israel.

The same, I know, is true of our broader Great Neck Jewish community: We have many Israeli families here, and Persian families, and Syrian and Iraqi families, who have very close personal ties to Israel.

And all of us, whether we know people in Israel or not, are feeling the pain of seeing our fellow Jews slaughtered and suffering.

So, the tragedies occurring in Israel, the anxieties of the day-to-day and hour-to-hour, are not just events unfolding on our news feed. They are *deeply* personal.

It's understandable if we're feeling overwhelmed by a whole host of emotions: sadness, hope, fear, compassion, empathy, depression, anxiety, anger, even rage.

Last week, I said I believe it's my job to wake up our community to Jew hatred among people we usually think of as our friends. Tonight, I'm here to say I believe it's my job to wake us up to the dangers of rage, vindictiveness, and bloodthirst.

That's not in any way to say that we shouldn't be angry, or that Israel shouldn't take military action to protect its citizens and root out Hamas.

It *should*. It *must*. It's the responsibility of any sovereign state to defend its people and secure its borders—Israel included.

But to let anger consume us, and whip us into a frenzy, so that we whoop and cheer and shout for blood—that's bad.

Not only does it dehumanize the enemy; it also dehumanizes *us*.

\*\*\*\*\*

There's tension in this, of course.

In our parashah this week, God makes a covenant with Noah: seven basic laws to guide humanity going forward.

One of them is: Do not kill.

"For your own lifeblood, I will require a reckoning," God says. "I will require a reckoning for human life, everyone for each other! Whoever sheds human blood, by human hands, shall that one's be shed. For in the image of God was humankind made." (*Gen. 9:5-6*)

And yet, we know that killing is sometimes warranted, even justified.

The 19th-century Lithuanian Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (known as Netziv) tries to resolve that tension by explaining that the law, "Do not kill," applies in normal conditions, during times of peace.

But it does not apply, he says, "in a time of war. ... Such is a *time* to kill, and there is no punishment for it. Because that's the way of the world."<sup>1</sup>

This is what modern theorists call a "realist" approach to war. The basic idea is that to defeat the enemy and protect your citizens, you "do what you have to do."

I've been hearing that a lot lately.

I heard speakers at a rally say those words exactly: "Israel will do what it has to do!"

But I also heard one guy make it more explicit. He said, "Let's be clear: This is a war between human beings and beasts!"

So, sadly, it wasn't surprising when a kid with an unmistakably prepubescent voice shouted back, "*Kill them!*"

Kids don't just say stuff like that. They learn it from their parents and their teachers and the grownups around them.

I found it horrifying.

I considered saying something about it.

But I didn't.

Should I have?

\*\*\*\*\*

I've been thinking about this a lot the last few days since I learned a teaching about Noah by the *Kedushat Levi*<sup>2</sup>, an 18th-century Ukrainian Chasidic master.

Noah gets a bad rap in the rabbinic tradition.

The Torah says that he was "righteous in his generation," but it was a lousy generation, so that's not saying much.

The sages compare him unfavorably to Abraham and Moses:

- When God wanted to destroy the world, Noah didn't stand up to God the way Abraham and Moses would later on.

- Noah might have done what God told him, but he was too passive: Instead of taking action, he waited for permission.
- They even turn what seems like a good quality into a fault: The Torah says, "Noah walked with God," yes, but it says Abraham "walked *before* God"—suggesting that while Noah might have been a *good* guy, he wasn't a *leader* like Abraham was.

The *Kedushat Levi* follows this tradition of Noah-critique.

He says that Noah's generation was so wicked that they had taken all the goodness in the world and cast it down into broken shards of darkness.

As a righteous man, Noah was able to see the darkened shards of goodness and raise them back up toward the light.

But Noah's flaw was that he was quiet about it and kept it to himself, so no one else knew the broken shards could be repaired—let alone that they could play a part in repairing them.

Noah's biggest mistake was that he didn't rebuke the people around him for their bad behavior.

Maybe he *was* too passive. Maybe he was afraid. Maybe he didn't think it was his place.

But whatever his reasons were for remaining silent, the point is that he let the people around him down. He could have made a difference for the good. Who knows? He could have helped save the world.

But he didn't speak up.

So, God sent the flood, and the whole world was destroyed.

\*\*\*\*\*

I'm not sure what I would have said had I found the courage to speak up. But after thinking about it a while, it might have been something like this:

The Hamas terrorists committed unimaginable, monstrous acts of murder and violence against innocent people. They are guilty of crimes against humanity.

Sometimes we use the word "animals" to describe people who do such barbaric things. But they are not animals. They are human beings.

The people of Gaza are not animals. They are human beings.

War is surely necessary. But in Judaism, war does not give even the most righteous nation license to just "do what they have to do." Realist geopolitics might, but our moral tradition does not.

The truth is that Israel is fighting for its life against people who, for generations, have been taught to see Israel as the embodiment of pure evil, as the sole source of their misery and suffering.

They have been raised to hate Israel more than to love life.

This insidious ideology tells them that to die for the Palestinian cause—the cause of destroying the State of Israel and ridding the land of Jews “from the river to the sea”—is not only noble; it is the very purpose and fulfillment of their life in this world.

This is what they believe, because it’s what they learned from their parents and their teachers and the grownups around them.

Their all-consuming hatred for Israel and their total devotion to its destruction is, to borrow a phrase from the Talmud, a *“minhag avoteihen b’yadeihen*—a traditional custom of their ancestors that was transmitted to them.”<sup>3</sup>

This inculcation of hatred in innocent children, generation after generation, is a tragic and criminal corruption of the human soul.

Now, there is no choice but to fight them. It’s a moral duty for a country to defend its people from enemies who would destroy them.

But we don’t have to foam at the mouth in crazed anticipation of it.

We don’t have to rile each other up and scream for blood.

And we probably shouldn’t sit silently when other people do that, either.

Because that only brings destruction upon destruction. And it dehumanizes everyone involved.

Instead, even as Israel fights what is indisputably a just and necessary war, we should try to find compassion in our hearts for the countless human beings who will die and suffer.

To feel compassion for the generations of children who have been twisted by a wicked ideology, like metal in a fiery crucible, to hate and to glorify violence and death.

When people around us—even our family and friends—get carried away by bloodthirst and rage, we should do two things: First, we should acknowledge their feelings and their right to feel them; and second, we should speak up for compassion.

I know it’s hard. And some people might really not like that I’m saying this.

But it’s *right*.

Because our enemies are not animals—and neither are we.

Our ability to feel some modicum of compassion for our fellow human beings, even the worst of them, is a measure of our own humanity.

<sup>1</sup> *Ha’amek Davar*, Gen. 9:5, s.v., *mi-yad ish achiv*

<sup>2</sup> *Kedushat Levi*, Noach 1

<sup>3</sup> b. *Chullin* 13b