

## **On Hunger in Gaza: Compassion Is Not a Zero-Sum Game**

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I have been struggling over the last few weeks to understand what is going on in Gaza.

Mainstream news sources say that there's famine there, and the people are dying of starvation. But then, of course, we learned that sources like The New York Times were playing fast and loose with the facts: The Times published a picture on the front page of a child who looked severely malnourished, only to admit later that this child suffers from a terrible but unrelated disease, and that his sibling, who appears well-fed, was cropped from the photo.

Such craven attempts to mislead the public in support of an anti-Israel narrative lend credence to the argument some are making that the reports of famine are nothing but an anti-Jewish blood libel.

How do we know what to believe and whom to trust?

A rabbinic colleague of mine taught me a helpful way to frame it: Her approach, she said, is to be "Israel-positive." Give Israel the benefit of the doubt. Start by presuming that Israel's intentions are good, or at least not immoral. For information about Israel, look first to Israeli sources.

I understand that this might not sit right with everyone, but "Israel-positive" feels like a reasonable and comfortable approach for me.

The Israeli source I trust the most is The Times of Israel journalist Haviv Rettig Gur. I trust him because he is incredibly knowledgeable, not only about Israeli government and Zionism but also about a wide range of disciplines, including history, philosophy, politics, rabbinic literature, and Jewish religion. Since October 7, I have found listening to him to be the best way for me to understand what is going on.

So, it really got my attention when Haviv said on his [podcast](#) last week<sup>1</sup>: "There is hunger in Gaza. Israelis have a hard time believing it because there have been claims of hunger that never panned out. ... Claims by serious agencies that hunger had gripped Gaza and everybody was in the throes of it when it simply wasn't true. ...

"And now, it's true. ... Please, Israelis, believe it this time, this is happening."

Haviv's guest, Hebrew University economist Dr. Yannay Spitzer, who has studied the situation in depth, suggested three reasons why most Israelis are skeptical that the hunger is real:

First, we Jews tend to define hunger by what Spitzer calls "the Buchenwald standard." If the Gazans in the photos don't look like the infamous images of concentration-camp prisoners, then, as far as we're concerned, they're not suffering from hunger.

"But that's not the kind of hunger we're talking about," Spitzer explained. "We're talking about a situation in which a significant portion of the population simply does not get the basic calories it needs in order to sustain for a prolonged period of time without losing health and hav[ing] detrimental health effects. ... People usually succumb to diseases way before they become emaciated bodies."

Second, Dr. Spitzer points to “the boy-who-cried-wolf” phenomenon. For nearly two years, the media has been making false claims about starvation in Gaza, so these communication outlets have lost all credibility with the Israeli public.

Third, Dr. Spitzer contends that the Israeli public has “lost sympathy” for the Gazan people. That is surely true of many American Jews, as well. And it’s understandable, given how so many ordinary Gazans enabled Hamas’ atrocities on October 7.

But this loss of sympathy will lead us to a dark place. Maybe it already has.

Judaism knows this. It’s why the Torah specifically commands us: “Lo tukhal l’hit’alem—you may not cover your eyes, pretending not to see” the plight of another human being. (Deut. 22:3 and Rashi ad loc.)

One can be Israel-positive while also acknowledging the dire food situation in Gaza and trying to help the people there.

Unfortunately, I sense an impulse in the Jewish community at this very raw moment to treat compassion as a zero-sum game. Some people wrongly think that to express sympathy for the Gazans, let alone to help them, is to betray their commitment to Israel.

Instead of “do not turn a blind eye to the plight of your fellow,” they tend toward a very different and much darker command, articulated in this week’s parashah about war with the Israelites’ neighboring peoples: “You shall show them no pity.” (Deut. 7:16)

To me, this supposed “command” is morally obscene. The God I believe in would never demand that we show no pity to the weak and vulnerable. Perhaps our ancestors who wrote it had lost sympathy for their neighbors, too.

Wracked with cognitive dissonance between our anger toward the Gazans and our desire to act morally, we come up with excuses to look away. We hear them all the time: “Since when does any warring country have to provide food for the enemy population?” And: “Israel brought in enough food to last six months. If Hamas stole it or let it rot, how is that our problem?”

But it is our problem.

Why?

Neither Haviv Rettig Gur nor Yannay Spitzer believe that Israel intentionally created famine in Gaza, and I agree with them.

And yet, it’s still Israel’s problem—our problem—because human beings are suffering in a place over which the Jewish state exerts significant control, and the tradition we claim to believe in tells us, “You may not cover your eyes and pretend it doesn’t exist.”

As a donor to the UJA Federation of New York, I was pleased to see that it gave \$1 million this week to help feed the people of Gaza. The funds will be distributed by IsraAID, an Israel-based organization that “responds to emergencies and helps people affected by crisis”<sup>2</sup> in more than 60 countries around the world.

The UJA's gift is in keeping with Jewish values. Our sympathy, our pity, our mercy, even for our enemy, make us strong, not weak. We betray nothing by offering our compassion and our aid to people who are malnourished.

But, if we withhold these things from them at a time like this, we will betray the most important thing of all: our humanity.

1 Ask Haviv Anything, "Episode 35: Solving Hunger in Gaza with Prof. Yannay Spitzer," August 8, 2025

2 <https://www.israaid.org/>