



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון
INSTITUTE שלום הרטמן

Reflections from November 2023 Rabbinic Mission to Israel

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I have so much to share. The images from my 3 days in Israel. The wisdom from revered teachers of mine, and from random Israelis who burst with insight and clarity. My own musings and questions. I want to share with you how I think things really are, and they are very bad in too many ways. And I want these words of Torah, like all words of Torah, to have sweetness, to touch your soul, and maybe even uplift it.

I'll begin with the moment that destroyed me, and which will occupy my mind for the rest of my life when I think of the position of the Jew in the world. It is a moment both of terror and defiance, two enormous polarities of Jewish reality. The former, forced upon us by those who have hated us. The latter, our response to it all.

On the first day in Israel we met with 4 women who survived Hamas's massacre at Kibbutz Holit. All the women's stories were harrowing. They reminded us of near-miss Holocaust escapes that defy description. But one stands out. A soft-spoken mother of 3 told us how she and her husband hid in their safe room, using all of their muscle power on the handle to keep the door closed. They heard the Hamas murderers just on the other side of the door. They felt the weight and pressure of their hands as they tried to open it.

At some point, when it seemed that they would not be able to hold out, and that their murders may be imminent, this Jewish mother said to her oldest son: אהובי...זה זמן להגיד את השמע/Ahuvi...ze zman l'hagid et haShma. My love...it is time to say the Shema. (The implication being "we are about to die, and a Jew should have the Shema on one's lips at death") And her adolescent son said back to her. אמא...כבר עשיתי/Emā...kvar asiti. Emā...I already did.

In 2023. In the Jewish State.

If that does not crack you open, and hurtle you through eons of Jewish history and suffering and vulnerability and too many centuries of weakness and powerlessness in the presence of vicious, hateful enemies...and also of Jewish resolve. And faith. And stubborn and stoic pride even in the face of horrific circumstances...then I am not sure what will.

On some deep level, the state of the State of Israel, and the state of the Jewish people, is contained entirely within that encounter. For we do, again, face implacable foes who mean it when they say they wish death, to us all. And it is not just Hamas we are facing. But the Hamas apologists around the world, and on far too many university campuses, who have become so morally blind that for them a word spoken the wrong way with the wrong new vocabulary is a micro-aggression, while wanton, bloodthirsty, orgiastic murder and rape, offered as religious sacrament while praising God, is somehow considered courageous resistance.

Provided it is resistance against the Jew. Any Jew. The adult Jew in the military uniform, carrying a weapon. And the adolescent Jew in a safe room doing everything possible not to be murdered.

The Jew walking across a college campus to get to class, wondering if it is safe to be conspicuously Jewish in the 21st century in the USA while listening to menacing, and sincere, cries of “Globalize the Intifada” is experiencing a phenomenon that is different from what the victims and the survivors of Oct. 7 confronted only in quantity and scope, not quality and category. They are the same. So we are all in that safe room. Holding tight to keep those who would silence us and murder us away from us. And pronouncing our faith and our identity, certainly if we are to face death. And proudly as we continue to claim life.

It seemed that every 15 minutes on this 72 hour trip we confronted something almost as infinite, as soul-cracking, as painfully illuminating, as category shifting as the moment I described. And the mantra I kept hearing in my head as one moment built on the previous one was this: I thought I knew. But by being in Israel, I now know that I really did not know, for how could I have? And it is now my obligation...to make it known.

There was an awful and intimate tension brewing in everything we witnessed. At times it felt as if we were visiting Auschwitz, while Auschwitz was still Auschwitz. A different numerical scale, of course, but we were dropped in to the atrocities as they remain unfolding. Israel is a nation in mourning. And it is also a nation in war. As Rabbi Donniel Hartman said, Kohelet was right. There is a time for war. And there is a time, and a need, for killing. The most moral version of it possible.

But when the Talmud, which elevated the Torah’s prohibition of murder into a true societal norm, also said “הבא להורגך השבם להורגו/*Haba l’horgekha, hashkem l’horgo* if someone is coming to kill you, you rise up and kill first,” it was planting within the Jewish intellect and spirit that there is no nobility to disappearing. There is no ethical beauty in permitting yourself or your family or your nation to be annihilated. Israel is a nation that, right now, is in an Ecclesiastic moment of *עת להרוג/et laharog*. A time to kill.

That truth was powerfully in tension with the notion that *עת להרוג/et laharog*, the time to kill, will not last. It cannot last. It will end. It will end because there will be growing pressure from the outside for Israel to replace waging war with yet another valiant attempt at waging peace. That may happen sooner than many Israelis and Jews want it to happen, before Hamas's full military ability to terrorize Israel is defeated.

And it will end also because at some point the Jewish nation itself feels a moral and historical and epic pull to move from quoting the Biblical verses and Talmudic dicta that support all efforts at self-defense of the Jewish body...to turning to age-old Jewish themes and wisdoms that are all about the self-defense of the Jewish soul. The Jewish soul that hates to kill. That loves to love. That centers *שלום/shalom/peace* in nearly every prayer we recite. That turn may happen later than many in the world would want, But it will happen. For it is the most Jewish and Israeli of pivots. We have been pivoting thus for millennia.

There is a nugget of Torah that many teachers and rabbis before me have wielded. It has to do with what seems like two entirely different Abrahams within Parshat Vayera, from a few weeks ago. We have the Abraham of the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative, who negotiates with God, pushes back against the divine decree, demanding that God change God's mind and spare those cities if even a *minyan* of righteous people can be found there.

And we have the Abraham of the *akeidah*, the binding of Isaac, who follows God's seemingly horrific decree with acquiescence, without raising a word of rebuke or even question. Would the real Abraham please stand up? Who are you, father of our nation? The man who follows God or critiques God? The man of trusting faith or the man who questions everything? Avraham, and each of us, is a little of both.

I find a similar seesaw in the character of Yaakov, especially within our *parsha* Vayishlah. The hardest part of the *parsha* to speak about is the abduction of Dinah. It is particularly hard to read those words now, as the rape of Jewish women on Oct 7 is belittled or, worse, called out as fabrication. Apparently, it is a #metoo world, as long as they are not Jews. But even in normal times, the narrative is painful.

The Torah is terse, as usual, and so the story lacks detail. It is unclear if Dina was raped, or merely seduced. It is unclear whether Shekhem, her putative abductor, had true feelings for her, and that is why he wanted to be with her. Or if he was an abuser who fabricated feelings after the fact. We'll never know the answers to that. The text, like so many Biblical texts, reads like a

Rorschach test. We see in it what we want to, what speaks to us, what we need in any given moment.

But what is unambiguous is that her brothers consider her dignity to have been violated. And that two of them take it into their own hands to enact justice, and perhaps vengeance, on Shekhem and his tribe. They feign willingness to permit intermarriage between the tribes, all a pretense to induce them to submit to circumcision in order to be acceptable mates for Jewish women. And then Shimon and Levi, taking advantage of their weakness post circumcision, kill every man in the town. The other brothers may not have participated in the killings, but the Torah is quick to let us know that they all plundered the town, because Shekhem had defiled their sister.

The Torah uses language to amplify the pathos of this story. Why did the Shekhemites submit to this plan in the first place, the plan that sealed their deaths. Because Shekhem and his father Hamor told them all: “הַאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה שְׁלֵמִים הֵם אֲתָנוּ/ha’anashim ha’eleh shleymim hem itanu.” These men, referring to Yaakov and his sons, are *shleymim*, from the root *shalem* which means full and pure, and of course *shalom*. “We trust these men. They offer peace. How can we not accept it?” It hurts to read of these Israelite men returning trust with bloodshed. For we Israelites, we Jews, know what it is like to be on the receiving end of such treachery.

This brings me to one side of Yaakov. He is furious with Shimon and Levi. Certainly he cares for the dignity of his daughter Dina. But ends cannot be justified by any means, with no limits. Righteous intent can lead to unacceptable outcomes. He excoriates them: אֲחַרְתֶּם אֹתִי/akhartem oti. You have stirred up trouble for me. לְהַבְאִישֵׁנִי בְיוֹשֵׁב הָאָרֶץ/l’havisheini b’yoshev ha’aretz. You have made me reek, made me odious, amongst those who dwell in this land.

One might choose to read this as Yaakov being disturbed not by the violence itself, but only by the realpolitik, how people will think of him and his clan. The medieval Spanish commentator Ibn Ezra pushes it a bit deeper. The reason that those who dwell in the land will hate me, is because I will emit a foul odor. Meaning, I do stink. Because what you did is foul. They will hate me, for good reason.

This is not momentary paternal rage. Yaakov does not forget what Shimon and Levi do to the name and reputation of Israel. At the end of his life, when he gathers his sons to bless them, Shimon and Levi essentially earn a curse. And an eternal distancing from the community of Israel. Yaakov says כְּלֵי חַמָּס מִבְּרִיתֵיהֶם/klei h_uamas m’kherotam. Their weapons are tools of lawlessness, of h_uamas. As I have shared many times, those two syllables, Hamas, are a verbal coincidence here, with no etymological connection. But even as a homophone, it is chilling that Yaakov names Shimon and Levi’s violent urges as representing Hamas. And then he says בְּסֹדֶם אֶל־תִּבְּאֵ נַפְשֵׁי

בְּבִדְיָ בְּקֹהֶלֶם אֶל־תִּתְּנֵד / *b'dosam al tavo nafshi, bikhalam al tehad k'vodi.*” Essentially—I want nothing to do with them. I cut them off from the legacy of Yisrael.

This aspect of Yaakov is reinforced in a *midrash* earlier in our *parsha*. The Torah describes Yaakov's state of mind before he reunites with Esau, whom Yaakov assumes wants to kill him, as he masses with 400 men. וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיִּצַר לוֹ / *vayera ya'alkov m'od vayetzer lo.*” Yaakov was very afraid, and distressed. Why the apparent redundancy? He was afraid, lest he be killed. He was distressed, lest he have to kill. This is evocative of Golda Meir's off-quoted line that when peace comes “we will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons.”

This is one slice of Yaakov, of Israel. This is a leader who, like his ancestors have attempted to do, and have been challenged to do, every time they have been blessed and burdened with sovereignty, knows there are limits to one's use of power, even when motivated by the defense of self, and of ravaged women. This is Yaakov whose name changed to Yisrael, for he struggled with God, and he still struggles, every day, to figure out the most Godly way to live life, rear family, create a nation, defend land, and fight enemies.

But like his grandfather, Yaakov was multifaceted. For we also have numerous examples of Yaakov who will do just about anything to dominate. To come out on top. To be the victor. He dupes his father-in-law Lavan out of his flock, his entire living, because he'd rather beat Lavan than lose to him.

He exploits Esav's weakness and hunger to barter for a birthright, and then doubles down years later, tricking even his own father to steal his older brother's blessing. Why? Because if he didn't, Esav would. Because some games are zero-sum. Because as we read in the Talmud, a text which associated Esau with Rome and then with Christianity, both mighty nations that spent centuries devouring the seed of Jacob, לְעוֹלָם עֲשׂו שׁוֹנֵא אֶת יַעֲקֹב / *l'olam Esav soneh et Ya'akov*. It always has been, and always will be, that Esau will hate Jacob.

And so we must be on guard. And we must defend what is ours. And we must be prepared to kill before we are killed. Yaakov/Yisrael bequeathed that, too, to his namesake nation, to all of us. Yaakov was born grabbing on to the *ekev*, the heel of his brother. And he will never tire of doing just about anything he can to make sure he is in the lead, with power, rather than behind, and vulnerable.

Both of those Yaakovs are struggling with one another in today's Jewish nation, and in today's State of Israel. Perhaps not on the far extremes. We must confess that there are too many Jews,

including in the current Israeli government, who are embarrassed by the Yaakov who cursed his violent sons. To them, Israel is only a fighter and survivor. This is a dangerous and narrow myopia of Jewish thinking.

And we must be aware that there are too many Jews, including many who wield power in synagogues and among Jewish organizations of repute and significance who are ashamed of the Jew with a gun, with the *magen david*, the Star of David, on weaponry of death, who are ashamed of the unavoidable messiness of defending a border and a nation. This, too, is a dangerous and at least partially self-hating and self-abnegating perversion of the Jewish soul.

But most of us, and I'd like to think that includes everyone in this room and everyone in our community, and nearly everyone we know who has been paralyzed and pulverized and resolute and ramrod since Oct 7th...most of us are struggling with both Yaakovs, just as Yaakov strove with Esau in their mother's belly. A constant and uncomfortable and at times intolerable tussling. The instinct to survive. And the instinct to be a nation worthy of survival.

I pray for strength and wisdom for the leaders of Israel. In the upper echelons of government. Among the military brass. And down to the 19 year old officer who must weigh the risks to his life, and the lives of his soldiers against the lives of innocent Palestinian Arabs as they seek to destroy the life of Hamas. Yaakov is battling in every tank. In every command center. I don't envy their decisions.

And I am uplifted by the strength and the wisdom of the people of the State of Israel, who have already found a way to live while still mourning. To muster a sense of community, of family. To, on the dime, reverse nearly every force that was pulling apart Israeli society on October 6th, such that it seems that the fabric of Israel has never been woven closer together than since after October 7th. Hostage Square, the impromptu sanctuary and art installation and prayer space and mourning tent that popped up within days on the large courtyard outside the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, tells that story.

There, catastrophe mingles with renewal. There, wrenching artistic displays of children murdered in cribs, and the faces and names of every hostage in Gaza, and harsh modern *midrashim* replacing *avinu malkeynu*, with the hebrew letter כ, meaning our father our king, with *avinu malkeynu*, with the hebrew letter ך, meaning our father who beats us...they are all woven in with faces of resilience, and men and women who grew up in those southern kibbutzim and then left to live their lives elsewhere, coming back to the tent dedicated to Nahal Oz, or Holit, representing their home communities, holding space for one another and for anyone who comes who wants to hear something about that town, that village. In Hostage Square there are nightly gatherings

of prayer, song, weeping and also reveling in what it means to have built a modern Jewish civilization in which everyone really does, on a deep level, care about everyone.

Hostage Square was impossible to walk through with one's soul unscathed. And without one's spirit sent soaring. At the same time, in the same place. Yaakov battling with Yaakov. Yaakov dancing with Yaakov.

I haven't told you all the stories. I didn't tell you about being in the room with Rachel Goldberg, an old acquaintance who came hurtling back into my life when I realized it was she who is the lioness mother of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, who was last seen in a video being thrown into the back of the truck by Hamas, minutes after his left arm was blown off by the grenade he tried to throw out of the safe room in which he and his friends were hiding.

I didn't tell you about the gathering at Hartman on Thursday night, which words cannot describe, linking this *parsha*, and Dina's ordeal, with the tragedy and the trauma of all the women who were raped and violated on October 7, a night of poetry and song, and deep heave-sobbing and also some healing.

I did not tell you about how holy it felt to get sweaty picking olives in a grove that has plenty of olives, but insufficient workers.

I did not tell you about the image that shows how impossibly complex and layered modern Israel is, when I went to Hadassah hospital to visit wounded soldiers, and when I walked into the first room saw a newly married Jewish soldier, who was nearly fatally wounded fighting this war against Palestinian Arab terrorists, being tended to by an Arab nurse, and this being utterly normal in this wholly non-normal state of Israel.

I did not tell you about Professor Chimichu Ri, a medical clown originally from Buenos Aires, who now spends his days walking around the Ein Gedi hotel where hundreds of internally displaced Israelis, many of them grieving terrible losses, are temporarily living. He looks for children to cheer up, and adults to put an unexpected smile on their faces, and he carries among his baubles a Harry Potter Hogwarts sorting hat, floppy and cute and a great prop, and sporting 3 holes created by Hamas bullets on Oct 7 as it sat in a chest of toys in a Kibbutz Holit home.

I didn't tell you about two women we met from Hartman's Rabbanut Israelit, an amazing multi-denominational rabbinic ordination program, training Orthodox and secular men and women to be rabbis. One of whom is named Ayala, a fierce feminist, whose husband is serving near Gaza, or maybe in Gaza, who told us that "My job right now is to be a mother. To my children. To my

people. There is no time to cry right now. Now I need to hold. And comfort. And rebuild. I will get to cry in the future.”

And one of whom is named Ra’anana, who said that when people ask her *מה שלמך/ma shlomekh*. “How are you?” she wants to respond “What do you want to hear? Do you have a ½ hour and a tissue?” And how while she has tried to live a life of service. To her husband and her children and her tradition and her professional obligations, she is now leaning in to how to say yes. “Do you want us to make you dinner tonight?” “Yes!” “Someone is offering free massages to wives of reservists who are fighting. Are you interested?” “Yes!”

I didn’t tell you about so many more moments, all deeply etched in my *kishkes*, but I hope I have conveyed the Naomi Shemer-like overlap and mixture of *דבש/dvash* and *עוקץ/oketz*, of stings so piercing and honey so delicious, of *מר/mar* and *מתוק/matok* of a bitterness the likes of which I had never witnessed in person alongside the sweetest parts of the Israeli culture and the Jewish world. I hope you have heard the laughter being laughed in Israel, and that you can taste Israel’s salty tears in your own mouth.

Every morning, at the end of Psalm 30 which we recite during *p’sukei d’zimra*, we describe God as *hafakhta misp’di l’maḥol li*, one who has turned our mourning into dancing. For the last 8 weeks, we have been awash in the devastation of October 7th, during which Hamas brought about the reverse: turning dancing into mourning. This is not the first time our people have suffered such horrific inversions at the hands of bloodthirsty enemies. The fictionalized scene in *Fiddler on the Roof*, when the Cossacks maraud through what ought to have been a purely joyful wedding, represented all-too-real truths from centuries of pogroms. We know the pain of precipitous and violent and tragic falls, from joy and celebration to grief and trauma.

And yet, our tradition knows well the pathway and the vocabulary for the onerous but sacred turnaround. I have officiated at two weddings since October 7, each of which had either an Israeli bride or groom. At both weddings, I remarked that the beloved Jewish wedding song, *Od yishama*, is a courageous aspiration, borne out of loss and devastation.

The words to the song are based on Jeremiah’s Biblical prophecy—that a destroyed and overwhelmed Jerusalem, deep in mourning, would one day be the very place from which happiness would erupt. The land of Israel, then bereft and in shock, would soon be the source of couples finding one another and building their own future and the future of the Jewish people.

Whenever we have felt ourselves in the pit, in the darkness, thrust into a realm of weeping and eulogizing by those who wished we would disappear, we have mustered the language and the

strength to be the very forces through which Psalm 30's words would come to life. God, with our help...and we, with God's help...are determined to turn *misped*, mourning, into *maḥol*, to dancing. We are determined to continue to build the Jewish nation. With both Yaakovs illuminating our path. With the drive to survive. And with the moral light of Torah refining our survival. With pride. With fervor. With confidence. In the land of Israel. In the land of our people. Wherever our people are.

Shabbat Shalom