

Shabbat Behukotai 5784
The Lie of Israel and Genocide
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Shabbat Shalom.

A story from an ancient Midrash: “Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai taught: ‘Imagine people are sitting on a boat. One of them takes a drill and begins drilling a hole [in the bottom]. His fellow passengers say, “What are you doing?” He says: “Why do you care? Am I not drilling under myself?” They say: “Because the water will rise and flood the whole boat we’re all on!””

This legend is a vivid picture of how we are all connected. How we are all on the same boat. We know that other people's actions - like our own family's, for example - affect us deeply. And what we do even when we are by ourselves, affects other people too. Even today, our own actions enable others to either sink or thrive.

I was thinking about this story in the context of the larger conversation about Israel today. When different people tell lies about Israel and its war against Hamas - and I notice this with increasing frequency in different media - I feel that our collective boat is being punctured with holes and taking on water. I feel like we sink a little bit more with every lie that is told. I'm not talking about *criticism* of Israel, as fair criticism is fair game, but outright lies. And when other people courageously speak out truthfully about Israel and Hamas, I feel they are plugging those holes, dumping out the water, and righting our boat.

There is one lie in particular that angers me every time I hear it, more so than any other: that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza. This charge feels like taking a jackhammer to the boat, not a little drill. I wince every time I hear this because it's 100% false in two ways. I wish to speak about this today because we are seeing and hearing this more and more, and because it's on the docket at the International Court of Justice. This canard of Israel and genocide is gaining traction, and we have a responsibility to shine the light of truth on what is really happening.

There are some people out there who strongly oppose Israel for different reasons, and I doubt they can be convinced otherwise. Instead I turn my focus to the many others, who are often not well-educated about Israel's complex history and today's geopolitical issues. I fear the more the word “genocide” is used in discussing Israel, the more those undecided people's opinions will be swayed to the other side. And I know there are many young people, Jewish and even pro-Israel, who aren't sure how to respond when they are confronted with the accusation that Israel is committing genocide. Jewish kids

should have a response for others, but more importantly, they should know in their hearts how blatantly false that idea is, and why that. My sermon today is for them, and for those who interact with them, which is really all of us.

First, it's vital to acknowledge how devastating this war has been to this point. For Israelis, October 7th was the worst single-day massacre of Jews since the Holocaust, as we have heard. 1200 people were savagely murdered in their own homes in Israel proper. Many others were brutally maimed and traumatized in so many ways. 250 hostages were taken captive, and about 125 remain locked up in Gaza. Some are alive, we hope; others are not, we know. Almost 300 Israeli soldiers have been killed in action since the war began. About 250,000 Israelis have been living away from their homes in the North and South, as it is not safe for them to return there because of the rocket fire. And the psychological trauma for the whole nation is incalculable and endless.

And for Palestinians too, the war in Gaza has been a nightmare. The Gaza Health Ministry estimates over 36,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war. I want to put an asterisk on that number. The health ministry is run by Hamas, which has an incentive to inflate the numbers because that increases pressure against Israel. The IDF estimates about 15,000 Hamas terrorists have been killed, which leaves about 21,000 non-Hamas Palestinians. This number does not include the civilians killed by Hamas rockets. And interestingly, the official UN count of Palestinian women and children killed during the war decreased by almost 47% earlier this month.

At any rate, it is impossible to know how many civilians supported Hamas and how many did not, but clearly there has been a devastating loss of life among innocent Palestinians. Not only in loss of life, but loss of homes and livelihood. We can believe - and I do - that the ultimate responsibility for this destruction lies at the feet of Hamas, not Israel, but we should acknowledge the tremendous suffering of innocent Palestinian civilians, including many children. Everyone with a heart should at least acknowledge that.

Let me now turn to what is *not* happening, and then what *is* happening. What is *not* happening is genocide. According to the United Nations, genocide is defined as “a crime committed with the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, in whole or in part.” Let me emphasize the word “*intent*.” War is categorically destructive, but it is the warring party’s *intention* that determines if genocide has been committed. The Nazi Party openly sought to destroy the Jewish people, which is why the Holocaust is a clear example of genocide. The reason Israel is not committing genocide is not because the Holocaust happened to us years ago, but because Israel today clearly *intends* to spare innocent lives as seen by their actions. We are very familiar with the examples: Israel routinely sends text messages, makes direct phone calls, and drops leaflets for residents to leave a building that is housing weapons or Hamas fighters

before destroying it. This way innocent Palestinians can evacuate ahead of time, as they have. Israel gives ample time for civilians to evacuate a neighborhood or city before it sends in its soldiers to fight there. Daily pauses have been routine. Israel does this knowing that Hamas fighters walk out safely alongside innocent civilians. Israel regularly calls off missions when they learn that innocent passersby are in the immediate area. Very sadly, this does not always happen and tragic mistakes are made sometimes, but these are accidental, not intentional, which is the key.

John Spencer is the American go-to expert on urban warfare at West Point, and he published an essay in Newsweek two months ago. He wrote:

“In my long career studying and advising on urban warfare for the U.S. military, I’ve never known an army to take such measures to attend to the enemy’s civilian population, especially while simultaneously combating the enemy in the very same buildings. In fact, by my analysis, Israel has implemented more precautions to prevent civilian harm than any military in history—above and beyond what international law requires and more than the U.S. did in its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The IDF has telegraphed almost every move ahead of time so civilians can relocate, nearly always ceding the element of surprise. This has allowed Hamas to reposition its senior leaders (and the Israel hostages) as needed. [My count of civilians who have died in Gaza] is a ratio of roughly 1 combatant to 1.5 civilians. Given Hamas’ likely inflation of the death count, the real figure could be closer to 1 to 1. Either way, the number would be historically low for modern urban warfare.”

So if genocide is not occurring, what is? War. A war that will not end. It’s a *just* war that is taking longer in part because of all these precautions. It’s *just* because Israel did not start this war or want this war, but Israel must eliminate the terrorist threat who lives on its borders, just like any other nation would. And it must bring the innocent hostages home, just like any other nation should. If those two pieces are not justification for going to war, what is?

The civilian casualty number is so high because Hamas will not end this war, neither by laying down their arms, nor releasing the hostages. Israel has repeatedly offered a temporary cease-fire to return the hostages, and it is *Hamas* that is saying No, no, no. This war is unprecedented in so many ways. But it comes back to this: Israel does everything it can to *minimize* Palestinian casualties, while Hamas does all it can to *maximize* Palestinian casualties.

As we know, Hamas embeds its fighters into civilian populations and uses them as human shields. Its fighters wear civilian clothes. They hide their weapons in hospitals,

mosques, schools, UN facilities, and cemeteries. They stole billions of dollars from their own citizens to build an underground web of tunnels, when they should have used that building material to rebuild homes, schools, and hospitals. Hamas prevents ordinary civilians from taking shelter in these same tunnels, maintaining them only for fighters and hostages. They steal food and fuel from the humanitarian convoys. And *these* are the people Hamas is supposed to govern. All this and more makes this an unprecedented enemy and battlefield.

It pains me to acknowledge that Israel has made many mistakes in the course of the fighting, some small and others large. When Israeli drones targeted the world Central Kitchen Aid convoy in April, that was a tragic mistake. When Israel targeted two Hamas leaders last week but ignited a fire that killed 45 people, that was a tragic accident. Israel's Prime Minister acknowledged as much publicly. In the fog of war, in the heat of battle, accidents happen and mistakes are made. Israel must do its utmost best to minimize these. But it's important to acknowledge that these are mistakes and accidents, not intentional events.

It's okay to be upset when Israel makes a mistake; I am. It's okay to not agree with every statement every Israeli leader makes; I don't. It's okay to question Israel's tactical decisions, like entering Rafah; I do. It's okay to wish that more humanitarian aid reached civilians and that people there were eating more and not starving; I do. And it's okay to call for a plan for the day-after in Gaza; I wish we had one to see. We don't have to agree with everything Israel's government says or does, to still stand by Israel's side in this fight. Or to call out lies against Israel. Indeed we should. Because if Israel loses, Hamas wins and remains in power.

Earlier I mentioned that the genocide claim against Israel is 100% false in *two* ways. The first is that Israel intends to *spare* innocent civilian lives, not kill them, as I explained. And the second is that not enough people affirm that there actually *is* a genocidal party in this war: Hamas. The Hamas charter openly calls for genocide against Jews and the total destruction of Israel. Google it and read it yourself. October 7th was the day they were frighteningly successful in their butchery, if only partially. Since then they have continued to launch rockets indiscriminately at Israel and to retain the hostages. They have openly called for recreating October 7th's in the future as well. If that's not genocide, that's only because of the IDF stands in its way. But the *intent* is clearly there, and intent is what matters when it comes to genocide. To accuse Israel of genocide and *not* apply that label to Hamas is doubly outrageous.

It's uncomfortable to even say the word "genocide," and even to talk about Israel and this war, mistakes and all. But if we don't tell our young people how we see what's happening - our children and grandchildren - they will encounter that word in other

places, without our being present to guide and to explain. And so, as uncomfortable as it is, each of us has work to do in repairing the holes that have punctured our collective boat.

As I close, I wish to turn back to words I shared in the immediate aftermath of October 7th. I heard a teaching from Alan Dershowitz who quoted the last verse from Psalm 29, which we sing in full every Friday night as part of Kabbalat Shabbat services. It reads, *Adonai Oz L'Amo Yiten, Adonai Yevarech Et Amo Vashalom*. "G-d will give strength to His people; G-d will bless His people with peace." There is indeed a deep connection between G-d's blessings of strength and peace: Sometimes peace comes only as a result of strength. But the purpose of strength and power must always be peace. May G-d grant strength to the people of Israel and the army of Israel, to defeat Hamas and bring home the hostages. And may that victory soon bring peace to all who live in the region. *Adonai Oz l'Amo Yiten, Adonai Yevarech Et Amo Vashalom*.

Shabbat Shalom.

