

Dear Friends,

As a rabbi, how I wish I had a wise and comforting fix for the despondency and torment we are facing in the aftermath of October 7th. But comfort is hard to come by these days. Indeed, in the current climate, the answers – and lack of answers – are as difficult as the questions.

As I write, Hamas continues to hold 240 Israeli hostages, including the elderly, children and the severely wounded. Our homeland is at war as the IDF battles to recover these hostages and put an end to Hamas' capacity ever to repeat the heinous acts of October 7. But there is another war brewing inside us, as well. It is a battle for clarity, a battle for understanding and reconciliation.

Against the backdrop of teeming antisemitism, it's becoming increasingly difficult to unpack our feelings and form sound opinions about those who hate us. Israel has a right to defend itself. We know that. And Hamas must be eradicated. We know that, too. But as Palestinian babies, children, parents, and grandparents, the ones whom Hamas abuses as human shields, die in the rubble of Israel's persistent strikes, we find ourselves shaken to the core, because as sympathetic as we may be to Israel's precarious existence, reconciling so much collateral death of innocent people is hard to reconcile or understand.

To be sure, we must refuse the idea that Israel "had it coming" due to its longstanding occupation of the Palestinian people. Israel left Gaza 18 years ago. It is Hamas who is occupying and oppressing the Palestinians today. It is Hamas who is butchering innocent victims, both Israeli and Palestinian in Gaza. Their goal is not resistance. Their goal here is terror. Hamas is not fighting for the Palestinian people. Hamas is fighting for Jewish blood. And Israel is struggling to make sure that never happens again.

All the same, innocents are dying as Israel prosecutes this just war against Hamas. Yes, Hamas is purposely placing them in harm's way. Yes, Hamas is barring them from fleeing to safer surroundings in the south. And yes, Hamas is hoarding fuel and food and medicine that are needed so desperately by so many. Still, though, innocents are dying as Israel prosecutes this just war against Hamas. And for anyone of Jewish conscience, for any of us who remembers the lesson of our Passover Hagaddah, in which God scolds Israel for cheering the deaths of their Egyptian pursuers – as guilty as they may be – on account of the fact that "Those are My children, too", the innocent deaths that follow each Israeli bombardment are just so difficult to reconcile.

If we are going to honor our Jewish inheritance, if we are going to take our Torah seriously, we must accept that every time another innocent Palestinian dies in the pursuit of Israeli survival, this is nothing less than the loss of yet another one of God's children. No matter how justified Israel's war with Hamas may be, we cannot rely on such justification to insulate ourselves from this loss. We cannot allow ourselves to become numb to the death of innocents.

What Israel is experiencing right now, and by extension, what we are experience right now, is a "Sophie's Choice," in which we are compelled to decide which of two undesirable acts will be less of a moral violation. It would be so much easier if we could just see the situation with pure black and white clarity. But when we think and feel and pray with open hearts and minds, I suspect we will find ourselves living in the grey, where what is just, what is right, and what is necessary can be so hard to see.

In the end, all I can say is that it's okay to live in that grey area. Grieving innocent lives – Palestinians and Israelis alike – hardly affords safe harbor to those who seek to destroy us. In fact, it may be one of the few things that can actually save us, because grieving the loss of innocent life highlights our humanity. Truly, the moment we allow terrorists to steal that from us, that becomes the very moment we have lost the war.

Perhaps most of all, it is empathy that separates us from the terrorists. Empathy allows us to recognize the tragic consequences of our actions, even when we know the alternative can be even worse. It also demands of us that we do everything we possibly can to avoid innocent death while also

protecting ourselves, because when a child dies, a child dies. Hamas may have been using that child as a human shield, but still, when a child dies, a child dies. It is up to us to avoid such death when and where we can.

It's not easy. In fact, it's more difficult than we can bear at times. But it's also real. It's an existential matter of life and death for the State of Israel. And in that grey area of competing truths, it's not only ok to struggle, I would say it's imperative to struggle with our Sophie's Choice. And when we struggle honestly, let's not be surprised if people of good should conclude differently on specific military choices, because the right answer can be so elusive.

We must allow ourselves the grace of not having all the answers. If you are sitting in the messiness of your own grief over the loss of so much innocent life in Israel and Gaza, please know that you are not alone. But know also that it is in your grief, I believe, that you will discover the essence of what it means to be human.

Praying that empathy will guide the way to our survival,

Rabbi Dubin