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“At a Time Like This”

Rabbi Les Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom White Plains NY

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Dear Congregants,

In the three months since the Simchat Torah massacre, I’ve participated in three ceremonies of conversion to Judaism. Two more are on the docket for the near future.

The rabbis on the *beit din* always say the same thing to the candidate: “Wow that you’re joining the Jewish people at a time like this.” To which the candidate invariably replies, “My understanding of Jewish history is that it’s always like this in one way or another. What better time than now to show solidarity with those who will become my people.”

Note that they don’t say “unanimity” with the Jewish people. These candidates are well-versed in our story, both past and present. They know that no unanimity ever existed among our folk, and that it was often discouraged in favor of “argument for the sake of Heaven,” *machloket l’shem shamayim*.”

They even know that “when the chips were down” many Jews separated themselves from the majority who had found a way to pull in the same direction for the sake of that elusive state of being called “unity,” or *achdut*. But it was always *achdut* in the end that enabled us – or most of us - to muddle through, and even to thrive at the far end of our periods of misery.

I sympathize to an extent with those in our Jewish community who can no longer find within themselves the capacity to live with the contradiction of our moment. They love the Jewish people, but they feel that the cost in human lives, including Jewish lives but certainly Palestinian ones, has rendered Israel’s current fight to be beyond necessary, even unjust. They believe that the price we are paying in the global degradation of our Jewish/Israeli reputation makes it necessary that we simply call for Israel’s campaign to stop in its tracks, regardless of what Hamas does, and regardless of whether Israeli hostages are released.

I sympathize, but I wholly disagree. I hate the war, and I hate what it continues to do to lives on the ground and opinions around the world. I hated it before it began. *And yet I support it because the alternative – and the awful aftermath of the alternative – is so much worse.*

In the second week of the war, I wrote the following to you:

We continue to find ways to stay engaged, informed, and supportive of Israel's gargantuan effort, even as our global Jewish people face mounting blame for the Gazan humanitarian crisis. We know in our minds that Israel's task is to respond decisively to the existential attack on its collective body and soul, all the while knowing in our hearts that Jewish tradition abhors causing innocents to suffer.

To paraphrase Cain's reply to God in last week's portion, "My burden is more than I can bear." Indeed, our contradiction is more than any of us can bear. Yet bear it we must.

We shake with anger and frustration as the hostages remain hidden in deep darkness. We hear their families' loud-and-clear calls for action, not simply prayers and hopes, and we try to remember to put ourselves in their shoes.

I wish I could write something significantly different now. But the hostages still languish (I hope!). Israel's Gaza Envelope inhabitants still cannot return to their homes, and if they do, they will reside next to a bloodthirsty population that has articulated its clear purpose, which is to destroy them "from the river to the sea." And this after many of those Israelis still tremble from the misogyny and brutality inflicted on their loved ones on that horrific day.

Hamas still encourages the world to call for Israel to cease fire, but has made no indication that they will do so themselves. Israel's approach has deprived the Gazan population of food, medicine, and safe shelter, but Hamas has not responded by distributing a morsel of its vast store of life-supporting supplies, or by opening its tunnels to protect the population from the air raids. The Gazan cynicism is as thick as the smoke rising from Israel's bombs. Thicker, really.

And so I join those of my rabbinic colleagues who have said to their congregants who keep asking for their rabbis to call for a unilateral end to Israel's campaign, by saying simply 'no.'

My hatred for the war and its effects; my suffering at the daily abuse meted out to us here and abroad; my unceasing shaking of my head in disbelief at the irresponsible and self-serving attitudes of Israel's elected government; and my cringing at the compromises I am forced to make against my basic comprehension of Jewish ethics – all of that does not in any way sway me from my support for our people's existential stand.

This is my understanding of rabbinic leadership. Rabbis should never merely “say what people need or want to hear.” Rabbis need to say what they believe to be right, even when it is rife with the contradictions that reflect the true nature of existence itself.

I dare say that our new converts to Judaism were fully able to grasp that truth about our lot in history. Thank God for *gerim*, for converts, because they bring their own hopefulness, their *tikvah*, to our parched souls. May we continue to welcome them, and may we continue to find the strength not to agree with one another, but to create that elusive *achdut* nonetheless. Believe me, we will need it in the days ahead.

Rabbi Les Bronstein