

Jewish Responses to Crisis: Birthing, Walking, and Learning

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Israel is in crisis: not only the State of Israel, but also the people of Israel. The State is at war, an existential war that has been called “a second war of independence”, caused by a terrorist massacre that was supposed to be impossible once the Jewish people had a sovereign state. In the words of Dan Gordis “The purpose of Zionism was to say that they are no longer going to be able to come and get us whenever they want and do to us and with us whatever they want. The purpose of Zionism was we are going to be people like all other people. We're going to defend ourselves. We're going to have our own culture, our own language, our own country, our own government, our own literature, our own everything... the idea of Zionism and of the Jewish state was to fundamentally change the existential condition of the Jew, and most importantly, not to be the victim on call that we always were.” The State of Israel is wounded. Some of the wounds are self-inflicted, but the deepest wounds are those that have called into question the assumption that the State of Israel was a definitive response to two millennia of powerlessness. It turns out that every state and every people are vulnerable to attack. The difference a state makes is having the ability to respond to attack, which we are now witnessing and judging.

The people of Israel are wounded, hurting from latent and covert antisemitism that has become blatant and overt antisemitism. The people of Israel are confused and divided - wondering why our social justice allies, Jews and non-Jews, on subjects as diverse as #MeToo and climate change are either sitting this one out with deafening indifference or standing on and with the other side. Emil Fackenheim, the theologian most famous for having articulated the 614th commandment, ““Thou shalt not hand Hitler posthumous victories.””, suggested that the future of Liberal Judaism would hinge on whether it would become an expression of liberalism

or an expression of Judaism. More than half a century later, Fackenheim's postulate feels like prophecy. We are witnessing the spiritual, social, and political implications of this choice – between liberalism and Judaism - in real time: in the academy, in the sanctuary, in social media, in public forums, in boardrooms, and in bedrooms. Crisis is not new to the people and the State of Israel, and therefore, we can benefit by uncovering and examining our responses to past crises, all of which could have resulted in the end of Judaism and the Jewish people. To what can we attribute Jewish resilience? People as diverse as Jean Paul Sartre, Mark Twain, and Karl Marx have been fascinated with this question and offered their own theories. How can our experience of past crises yield insight into our current crises? Three authentic, constructive Jewish responses to crisis are: birthing, walking, and learning.

The Hebrew word for a crisis, *משבר* (*mashber*), is also the Hebrew word for birthstool. Would there be a people of Israel without Shifra and Puah, the midwives who defied Pharaoh's order to kill all newborn Hebrew children? Their brave acts of defiance led to the birth of Yocheved's son Moses, and the rest is history, our history. Shirah and Puah refused to follow an immoral edict. They represent timeless models of moral courage born of moral clarity. Massachusetts is home to the most prestigious of universities, and yet we have learned that there is a profound difference between knowledge and wisdom, between academic intelligence and ethical excellence. It is possible to be intellectually endowed and morally bankrupt. It is not only possible; it is factual. We are all witnesses. Where are our Shifrahs and Puahs, people who refuse to prostitute their integrity, who are willing to risk their livelihoods, if not their lives to preserve their character, whose moral compass is oriented towards caring, kindness, and compassion, who choose life and hope, who look at the present and see into the future? A *משבר* is also a *משבר*. A crisis is also a birthstool, an opportunity to give birth to new ideas, to think differently about a

seemingly intractable conflict between Arabs and Israelis, to acknowledge that past performance need not determine future decisions, that history need not be destiny. עת ללדת: A crisis is a time to give birth. A crisis is also a time to marshal the courage to walk, to move forward with courage and purpose.

The Book of Psalms is a songbook, a prayerbook, a playbook that accompanies, inspires, and guides Jewish life. The most famous, or at least the most well-known of the 150 psalms, Psalm 23, offers an insightful, trenchant response to crisis. “ גם כי אלך בגיא צלמות לא אירא רע כי אתה ” – עמד – Though I **walk** through the valley of death’s shadow, I fear no harm, for You are with me. (Ps.23:4) What are we supposed to do when we are in a valley during our lives, our individual lives, or our lives as a people? Walking is not only good physical exercise; walking is good spiritual exercise. Rather than trying to deny the existence of the valley or to dwell in it or to run around or through it, we are taught to make steady forward progress, to accept the challenge the crisis presents and yet to refuse to allow the crisis to define us. The conflict between Arabs and Israelis ought not be the sole, or even the primary focus of our relationship to Israel. My relationship to Israel is much more personal and spiritual than political. One of our daughters, her spouse, and their child live in Tel Aviv. Several weeks ago, I posed a mundane question, how are you?” and I received a sacred, loving response: “Dear Abba, “The answer is, it’s complicated, filled with duality and changes every day. At the beginning it was - We are safe, but we are broken, shocked, horrified, grieving. Now things are a bit more “normal” but my mind is still often occupied with the horrors that occurred on October 7th, and the unknown fate of many of the hostages. As a woman and a mom, this hits and hurts deeply. With Ben in *miluim* (reserves), I am for the most part a single mom. It’s been challenging but ultimately, I am grateful that he is not in combat and in all likelihood is OK. I think of the many women that have husbands and

partners battling in Gaza and wonder how they are able to breathe. It's also challenging to see how much of the world is demonizing Israel and failing to protect Jews worldwide - especially those with whom I share many values. As an Israeli citizen I am so proud of how we managed to mobilize and come together as a country to help one another. At the same time, I am so ashamed of our government for its continued incompetence and lack of unified leadership when we need it most. I'm not sure how this will "end", but I hope it is soon because we are all very tired! Love, Cara

I am a Jew because I love a Torah that chooses life and hope and humility and compassion. I am not a Jew because of antisemitism; I am a Jew despite antisemitism. By walking deliberately and judiciously through the valley of death's shadow we can observe our surroundings. We should take notice that unlike 80 years ago, the people of Israel have friends, real friends, who are willing to stand with us when we are in shock and in mourning. We can learn to distinguish between our friends and the people we thought were our friends. As a people in crisis, we are also a people in shock, in mourning. We have had fundamental operating assumptions contravened by reality. We thought we were powerful, and we have learned that the state and the people of Israel are vulnerable. We live with myths, stories we tell ourselves that become traditions integrated into our identities. Myths can be based in historical narratives. They can also be the stuff of legend. Myths can be true even though they may lack factual proof. Myths help us make sense of the world in which we live. Myths sustain us. The multiple creation stories in the Torah are myths, as are the Exodus from Egypt, the understanding that mitzvah means "good deed", the claim that all Jews are rich or smart or, quite frankly that all Jews are anything. We have been sustained by the myth that Jews are safe here in the United States, and that the existence of the State of Israel means at the very least, that Jews have a haven. Now, we

are in a valley as a people and have learned from our past, we will walk through this one with our eyes, ears, and hearts open.

We mark the nadir, the lowest point in Jewish time, on Tisha B'Av, the 9th day of the Hebrew month Av, when we minimize joy, the antithesis of Purim, when we maximize joy. Tisha B'av commemorates a litany of Jewish crises – punctuated by the destruction of the first and second Temples, the expulsion from Spain, the Black Plague....Any one of these events could have spelled the end of Judaism and the Jewish people, but none of them did, and one reason, arguably the primary reason for the continuing life and growth of Judaism and the Jewish people is.... **Learning.**

How we wish we could renew and relive our days in a perpetual October 6th! However, in the absence of our ability to turn back time, we can exercise our capacity to learn back time, to learn from October 7th, the Black Sabbath. One mourning custom involves studying the foundational text of Rabbinic wisdom, the Mishnah. A justification for doing so is both amusing and amazing. In Hebrew, Mishnah is spelled mem-shin-nun-hey. The same four Hebrew letters can be slightly rearranged to spell a different word – *neshamah* – soul. We study Mishnah after the death of someone we have loved and lost to begin to recover their soul and to heal our own soul. As a people in mourning, we all need to recover and heal our souls, to remind ourselves of our purpose, our *raison d'être*, our mission and our vision, which has not changed since Abraham and Sarah – to be a blessing: a source of light, of love, and of hope.

Yitzhak Rabin, of blessed memory, was known for his heroism more than his eloquence, his deeds more than his words. Rabin's handshake with Yasir Arafat embodied a rabbinic teaching. Who is a hero? Someone who takes the hand that has raised up to strike him and finds a way to shake it. Nevertheless, the following words that echo through Jewish time and space, are

his. “Almost from the dawn of our days as a people – the meaningful moments of our lives have moved within the content of the Kaddish. The Yitgadal v’yitkadash, which opens the prayer that sanctifies the One who resides in the heavens, expresses the deep faith of the Jewish people in the One who makes peace in the heavens. The joy of the Jewish people is always mixed with sorrow – the huppah with the broken glass underneath it (at the end of a wedding). The dedication of a new house with an unfinished plaster as a remembrance of the destruction of the Temples. The Passover Seder and the bitter herbs. In Israel, the tears of Yom HaZikaron touch the circles of dancers on Yom HaAtzmaut (since they come one after the other) The spark in our eyes may have dimmed, but not the spark of our life and faith. And it is precisely this faith that will carry us to the coming days – to days of memory and love, towards days of peace.

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