

*B'tzelem Elohim*, In the Image of God: A Shabbat Reflection  
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Ecclesiastes teaches, “There is a time set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1)...and included in the familiar litany that follows, Koheleth says, “There is a time for silence, and a time for speaking.” (Ecclesiastes 3:7) This is a time that demands speaking, and yet, it is difficult to distill it all down into one thought or idea. It is difficult to be clear, and to be certain, to speak words that are true, knowing that the complexity of this moment demands that we hold more than one truth at a time. I am aware - as are all my colleagues - that in any single statement or prayer, we likely do not fully express the multiple truths and feelings that deserve recognition in this time of war and historic suffering in Israel and Gaza. But to remain silent in such days as these is not the Jewish way. We must speak and discuss and revise and speak again. So I acknowledge that there is too much - too many truths - to convey in this moment and I share only this...

A few days ago, Yehudah Kurtzer of the Shalom Hartman Institute published an Opinion piece in the Forward. He calls our attention to the important distinction between **tactics** and **values** when living through a just war. On social media and in public discourse generally, there have been a lot of discussions about tactics by lots of people, many of whom are not qualified or well informed enough to address the topic meaningfully. As we welcome Shabbat, let us take Kurtzer’s suggestion and talk instead about values.

Last week, we read the story of creation - the very beginning of the Torah. It’s a universal story, it’s not about the twelve tribes, or chosen-ness, or the Jewish people. It’s not about that first family, Abraham and Sarah. It is our foundational myth, meant to explain the nature of our existence. When we read about the creation of people, we learn that people are created “*B’tzelem Elohim*- In the image of God,”(Gen. 1:27). Each of us, no matter who we are, is created with a divine spark. It is striking that our story - Our Torah - begins with the assertion that every human being is created with a basic and foundational sameness - a shared basis of dignity. Each of us is equally worthy of mercy and love - across all humanity.

In the past two weeks, we have entered into an environment that is pushing us away from our commitment to *b'tzelem elohim*. The sheer brutality of Hamas' actions on October 7, and the incomprehensible scale of death and injury - growing by the day in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel. It fuels our descent into dehumanization. How can we really allow ourselves to fully absorb all of the pain- the mourning of families who have lost loved ones, the weight of waiting for the return of hostages, the fear that permeates living with war, the anxiety that comes from a scarcity of essential resources. Our inclination to shield ourselves leads us to reduce people to numbers and to rationalize suffering by debating the ethics and the efficacy of tactics.

I am not suggesting that we hold all of that pain, all of the time. But we cannot allow ourselves to grow blind to the divine spark in each person. Can we hold on to the humanity of those with whom we feel connected, and also those with whom we do not? Certainly, we are not called by our faith to be absolute pacifists, our faith reminds us, in that same Ecclesiastes text, that there is a time for every experience under heaven, including a time for war. Our Torah recounts battles waged at God's behest and confrontations with our enemies in response to their attacks. And we also believe that life, every life, is sacred above everything else. And that *peace* is the preferred outcome. In times of conflict and war, the **values** should inform the **tactics**. As we absorb all of the suffering unfolding before us, we can never lose sight of the holiness of every one of God's creations.

I pray that we do not allow ourselves to be swept away by rhetoric and slogans. That in supporting our side, whatever that means to you, we don't lose sight of how much has already been lost. Let us always be guided by the value of *b'tzelem elohim*, because if we lose sight of that, then we've lost the essence of the humanity with which we were created, and each of us will have lost ourselves.

We pray for peace: *Od yavo shalom aleinu, v'al kulam, salaam*. Peace will come upon us and upon everyone.