

“Be a Human”

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Journalist David Remnick recently published a piece in the New Yorker about the situation in Israel and Gaza. He wrote about viewing footage of the October 7th assault prepared by the Israel Defense Force. It was a 43 minute video drawn from social media posts, security camera recordings, and videos captured by the Hamas perpetrators themselves on Go-Pro cameras and cell phones. It was just a fraction of the footage documenting that horrific day. Remnick described sitting in the windowless conference room where he viewed the video with the IDF representatives. There was a table, and in the center...three bowls of snacks. Peanuts, walnuts, and sugar cookies.^[1]

As I read Remnick’s essay, there was something about the snacks that took my breath away, the thought of someone engaging in this small act of hospitality: pouring snacks into bowls for the journalists as they watched the very worst of human behavior on display. Journalists watching, and hopefully reporting and verifying the atrocities committed on that awful day. Sitting in a dark conference room and watching 43 minutes of almost unspeakable barbarism, at a table set with peanuts and walnuts and sugar cookies.

Hillel teaches, “*b’makom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiot ish.*” “In a place where no one behaves like a human being, we must strive to be human.” [Pirkei Avot 2:5] This text comes from Pirkei Avot or Ethics of the Sages. Rabbi Hillel shares these words to live by: a six word story for a broken world. A teaching for when we find ourselves in a place like this- not quite sure where to turn. Who will step into the breach? It is in these moments, that *we* are called upon to be human.

The events of October 7th and what followed have called to us, over and over again to marshal a kind of moral reserve, to try and wade through a constant barrage of bad news, to find a way to right ourselves while being tossed between waves of horrific images, frightening stories, instances of antisemitism.

This is a confrontation with fear, with evil, with uncertainty. An unwanted awakening of Jewish identity, what does all of this mean for me? The sense of betrayal, upon learning that a friend or loved one sees it all quite differently. Not because you disagree, but because their understanding shakes who you thought they were.

Perhaps because technology is so sophisticated, so intuitive, so advanced we were duped into believing that we have become better at being human, more evolved. That we had left that tribalism and bloodlust behind, as our phones got thinner, and our homes got smarter. There is footage and photos undeniably documenting the horror, the suffering. When we see it with our own eyes, one wonders, “is this really the best that we can do?”

Yet, here we are- navigating how to show up in this broken world. What position to take. Which fight to pick. Do I sign that letter? Do I post that article? Do I attend that protest? Do I send my kid to school that day at the temple? Do we go to services? What do I say to my friends and my family?

In this week's *parasha*, we follow the journey of Abraham and Sarah. Beginning with the surprising revelation that Sarah is pregnant with Isaac and concluding with that miracle-child nearly being sacrificed. Along the way, we learn about Sodom, a city so overrun with evil that God decides to destroy the city and all of its inhabitants.

What follows is a famous negotiation between Abraham and God, "What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it?" (Genesis 18:24) God is convinced— God will save the city for fifty innocent people. Still, Abraham is not satisfied, "What if the fifty innocents should lack five? Will you destroy the whole city for want of five?" (Genesis 18:28) God agrees— God will not destroy the city if there are forty-five innocent people. They continue the "negotiation" until God finally settles on ten...ten innocent people would be enough for God to spare the city.

It's a powerful story, a proof text for the little guy standing up for justice, a foreshadowing of the notion of Yisra-El. That we are a people of God wrestlers. But it is not a story with a happy ending. Ultimately, not even ten innocent people can be found in this evil city— Sodom and Gomorrah are flattened. Genesis teaches that the inhabitants are annihilated, and the land scorched.

The tale of Abraham's argument is about God, and about Sodom and Gomorrah, but mostly it's about Abraham. When confronted by the possibility of innocents put to death, Abraham cannot stay silent. In a place where there is evil, when the talk is extreme and responses are emotional, Abraham is compelled to speak in a moral voice. In a city with no innocent people, Abraham still speaks of what is right.

"B'makom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l'hiot ish." "In a place where no one behaves like a human being, we must strive to be human."

This moment in history is complex- and those who speak with simple certainty, to me, are suspect. And, as the days pass, I have also realized that we cannot stay silent, we cannot withdraw. No, we do not need to become foreign policy experts, scholars of just war theory, or moral philosophers. But we cannot throw our hands up and opt out. We cannot be so overwhelmed by the shouting that we allow ourselves to stay silent.

"B'makom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l'hiot ish." "In a place where no one behaves like a human being, we must strive to be human." We are already living in the land of no good options. The brutality of October 7th, the hostages held for their fourth Shabbat, the immense loss of Palestinian civilian lives--there are no easy answers.

There is, for so many of us, an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. But that does not relieve us of our agency. We owe it to ourselves to try and get clear on what we understand to be true. To talk to people we trust, to be deliberate about what we read and watch and listen to. War is a human construct, fought through a series of human decisions, a conflict is a human creation, and peace is born of human imagination. In a time of dehumanization, we have to be human, and we have to protect our souls.

In the fall of 2014, Jewish Israeli author Etgar Keret and Israeli-Palestinian author Sayed Kashua exchanged letters. Sayed Kashua had left Israel, joined by his family for a sabbatical in

Illinois. It was during Operation Protective Edge, the war fought that summer in Gaza. Violence against Arabs in Israel was rising. Kashua wrote to Keret about life in America, he described the search for warm enough winter clothes and his attempt to find a decent bar. He confessed his feeling of displacement, while also saying that he could never return to Israel because of his fear of persecution, the safety of his children, the rampant anti-Arab sentiment. He poured out his sadness and worry and concluded his letter, “Please, Etgar, tell me a short story with a happy ending, please.”

Keret responded. He wrote about the time he spent in America- his son’s fascination with the sheer volume of soda vending machines and our national celebration of Donut Day.

He then attempted to write a story with a happy ending. This is Keret’s story:

2015 was a historic year because of an idea that a brilliant Arab Israeli expatriate had...A brilliant idea popped into his head, a way to solve the problems of the Middle East. If the issue wasn’t territory but people, all they had to do was update the “two-state solution” to a “three-state solution,” so that the Palestinians would live in the first, the Israelis in the second, and the radical fundamentalists, the racists, and all those people who just got their kicks fighting would live in the third. Barack Obama, [whom the fictional writer bumps into in a diner at a gas station on the outskirts of Urbana, Illinois] simply loved it.

...

And then, in less than a decade, there were three countries side by side in that tiny corner of the Middle East: the State of Israel, the State of Palestine, and the Republic of Force-Is-the-Only-Language-They-Understand, a place where civil war raged constantly and which arms dealers and news broadcasters supported.

The protagonist in Keret’s fictional fantasy, that brilliant Arab Israeli ex-patriot, is quite modest, and politely refused the Nobel Peace Prize. And then he packed his suitcase, and went back with his family to his old house in Israel.^[2]

It is a story with a happy ending.

There’s a commentary from this week’s *parashah* that asks why Abraham stopped negotiating with God at ten people, why not save Sodom for one innocent person. It suggests that it takes ten people to generate an alternate way of living.^[3] You have got to have some company.

“*B’makom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiot ish.*” “In a place where no one behaves like a human being, we must strive to be human.”

I believe that there are more of us who strive to behave like humans than we might realize.

So, right now, let us try to be human, to find our moral center, and to speak from that place. To hold the pain of this moment, and still try to be human. And then we will find each other. And we won't feel so alone.

Shabbat Shalom.

^[1] <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/11/06/israel-gaza-war-hamas>

^[2] <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/tell-story-happy-ending-exchange-etgar-keret-sayed-kashua>

^[3] Eitz Hayim, commentary on Genesis 18:32