

Five Months of War: Four Comments

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By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

“In many ways it is still October 7th. Time froze,” says Rabbi Ammi Hirsch, offering his perspective of where we are five months later, on the Shabbat before embarking for Israel with our synagogue's mission. “The road ahead will be difficult and painful... my message to you is: keep the faith.”

More than five months have unfolded since October 7. In many ways, it is still October 7. Time froze. We have not recovered. We have not even moved on. We are still traumatized. I have spoken and interacted with hundreds of you and other American Jews during these months. I recognize your pain, anger, fear, anxiety, insecurity, doubt and confusion. I share these feelings.

On this — the last Shabbat before our synagogue mission to Israel — I offer you my perspective of where we are. These are my views. You do not have to agree with them. You have an open invitation to write to me, call me, visit me, and give me a piece of your mind.

Remember: my vocation is to share with you my understanding of age-old Jewish values and their application to every aspect of our lives: to try to convey in word and in deed the passions, the poignancy, and the drama of Jewish life. I have never avoided controversy. I am unsuited by my nature to spout such bland and innocuous utterances so as to provoke no dissent, disagreement or dispute. The result of that would be to never say anything worth listening to.

In this spirit, I offer four comments:

1. Palestinian Suffering

I am torn apart by Palestinian suffering. To ignore civilian deaths — even if in accordance with the laws of just war — to feel nothing — no compassion, empathy, sorrow or lamentation for human misery — is un-Jewish. I want to say this as strongly as I can: If you do not recoil from the death of a child, the destruction of families, the dislocation and anguish of innocent people — something has died in you. You are emotionally hollow, empty and numb. You have lost your soul.

In Jewish thought, revenge is for God, not human beings. We are prohibited even to rejoice in the deaths of enemy combatants — let alone non-combatants. The Midrash recounts God admonishing the angels on high: “Why do you sing songs of praise to me when my children are drowning in the sea?” These children of God were the warriors of Pharaoh bent on killing every last fleeing Israelite.

I confess to you that I have been struggling with my emotions since October 7. I feel so violated, so angry, so hurt by the moral equivocation of people who have been my

friends and allies in the struggle for social justice; I am so weighed down by the fate of the hostages and so worried about Israel that I struggle to find more room in my heart for those in Gaza whose terrorist government launched this war. If this describes you, fight that impulse. Do not succumb to moral miasma. Jews are described in our tradition as *rachmanim bnai rachmanim* — merciful ones — the children of the merciful. With everything else you hold in your heart, keep abundant space for the suffering of innocent Palestinians. It is not wrong for critics of Israel to constantly remind us of the human cost of war. It is not wrong to expect the Israeli government to minimize civilian casualties as much as possible, including doing all it can to prevent hunger and disease.

2. An Existential War

While it is, of course, legitimate for critics, and even enemies of Israel, to use their electoral influence to emphasize the plight of Palestinian civilians — this is how democracy works — their suffering is not the only issue. Hamas imposed on Israel a war of no choice. It is an existential war against Islamist forces who seek not only Israel's annihilation, but the destruction of the West. The only reason that 1200 Israelis were slaughtered rather than 12,000 or 120,000 — is not in intent — but in capacity. The terrorists were stopped by the most courageous acts of civilian and military valor. Thousands of people are alive today because of regular Israeli civilians and security personnel who rushed to the scene and on their shoulders held the sky suspended.

I happened to catch a documentary recently on the Battle of Normandy. What most of us remember is D-Day — June 6, 1944 — and the horrible price paid to establish beachheads on the shore. Few of us realize that the Battle of Normandy took nearly three months. German forces were arrayed in defense lines fortified over many years — and they were embedded in the local population. In the eighty-five days it took to liberate Normandy, an estimated twenty thousand French civilians died — and many thousands more were wounded and dislocated. The Allies bombed French villages, pulverizing them to rubble. It was the only way to loosen the death grip of Nazi forces. Nobody asked then — nor do they ask today — why the Allies caused the deaths of so many thousands of French villagers. To the contrary — there are still annual celebrations of the liberation and eternal gratitude to America. They realized then — and they understand now — that war is awful and causes us to kill and that innocents die and suffer in war. It is why all who care about fellow human beings should do everything in their power to avoid war in the first place. Once a war is launched, it will inevitably result in death and destruction. And the more dangerous and the more extreme is your enemy — the more ferocious the war will be. All who care about the Lebanese should thwart Hezbollah now — before Israel is compelled to respond in full force.

What did they expect? That Israel would not defend itself from the worst pogrom inflicted on Jews since the Holocaust? What did they expect? That no innocent civilians would be killed — especially since Hamas hides behind their own population, using them as human shields? Can you imagine how much international money, including

your own tax dollars, were invested to build a tunnel system under Gaza that is more elaborate than the London underground? Can you imagine how many people must have known about it? How many workers it took to build this monstrosity? Practically every hospital, school, playground and mosque contained openings to tunnels and weapons inside. What country in the world would tolerate this threat on its border?

October 7 revealed to Israelis, Jews and all fair-minded people that genocidal forces seeking the destruction of Israel and the extermination of Jews are arrayed a mile away from Jewish villages. Where you stand on an issue is often determined by where you sit. If you sit in an Ivy League classroom, you perceive threats differently than if you are a mile away from genocidal murderers. The henchmen of Hamas didn't ask the political views of those they butchered and kidnapped. If the most fervent peace activists of American Jewry — even anti-Zionist BDS activists — happened to have found themselves in one of those Israeli villages on October 7, they, too, would have been slaughtered. Every Jew, every Israeli, is considered a legitimate target by Hamas, including nine-month-old Kfir who was taken hostage — and if he is still alive, marked his first birthday in captivity.

They killed and took hostage the most liberal of Israelis — the ones who worked tirelessly for coexistence — who met sick Gazans at the gate and drove them to Israeli hospitals at their own expense. They offered jobs and decent wages to Gazans, who later informed Hamas precisely where were the safe rooms and armories and where the security personnel lived. Almost to a person, these, the most liberal-minded Israelis feel so betrayed that they no longer believe that peace — or even coexistence — is possible — at least not until an entire generation of Palestinians has been de-radicalized.

This is an existential war imposed on Israel while it was sleeping at 6:30 a.m. after a night of celebrating Shabbat and the festival, rejoicing in life, communing with families, and dancing at concerts. No Israeli woke up on October 7 saying to himself how can I conquer Gaza today, or how can I harm Palestinians today. The opposite, as it turns out: thousands of Gazans woke up on October 7 to massacre, gang rape, pillage and murder Jews — men, women, children, and babies. And they were so deliriously proud of what they did, they filmed themselves — something even the Nazis didn't do. The Nazis tried to hide their crimes.

This is not freedom fighting. It is sheer evil — homicidal, demonic and difficult to conceive how such cruelty is even possible. October 7 opened a window into what is in store for Israel if these forces win. Hamas promised more October 7s. This is the broader context. It is a struggle that involves Israel most acutely because Israel is on the front lines. But if they defeat Israel, they will come for us in Europe and America.

There would be a ceasefire by the time we wake up tomorrow morning if Hamas releases the hostages and lays down its arms. Why no demand to release the hostages and lay down their arms?

I can't get those hostages out of my mind — men, women, children, grandparents. We will meet some of their families next week in Israel. The pain is unbearable. I see a

picture of a hostage and I find myself imagining what she is going through — and I can only hold that thought for a brief moment. I can't stand imagining the agony of her suffering.

3. Anti-Semitism and the Threat to the Liberal Order

One of the saddest developments since October 7 is the shock experienced by American Jews, who, for the first time in their lives, are encountering pervasive anti-Semitism. We are beginning to hear eerie echoes of Europe, the haunting howls of hatred that brought our ancestors to these shores in the first place. The nexus between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is now much clearer to many of those who were blind or willfully oblivious.

For years now, some of us have been warning of the deteriorating commitment to liberal values on the Left, camouflaged behind a forest of high-sounding words like “progress, civil and human rights, liberation, anti-racism, and anti-colonialism,” but too many have been unwilling or unable to see it. October 7 scattered the mist and exposed the peril. The stakes go way beyond Israel, the Palestinians or the Middle East. In some urgent ways, it is about us — Western civilization.

Universities, elite schools, and human rights organizations couldn't even find the compassion to identify with the victims of Hamas, let alone condemn the perpetrators, even before Israel responded militarily. Not only did they avoid condemning Hamas, some considered the massacres legitimate resistance. These were our decades-long partners, brothers and sisters in arms. Jews helped build America's great universities. We devoted ourselves to civil liberties and human rights, participating in, and helping to found, some of America's preeminent civil rights organizations.

What business do progressives have supporting those who oppress women, gays, minorities and Christians? How could feminist organizations with whom we marched arm in arm not condemn horrific sexual violence against Israeli women? How to explain that the very people who insist that women should be assumed to be telling the truth about sexual assaults, demanded proof from Israeli women, refusing to consider the starkest evidence in front of their eyes? What to make of climate activist allies, who take time out of their days and money out of their coffers to oppose Israel, as if there is some insidious intersectional connection between the evils of the Jewish state and the perils of climate change.

Why do so many young Americans support Hamas which is opposed to everything we in the West believe? Why do young adults, especially, who are so acutely sensitive to the assignment of moral accountability, fail to assign moral agency to Palestinians? Why treat them as passive victims bearing no political or moral responsibility for their actions?

This is not liberalism; it is a betrayal of liberalism. It is not progressive; it is regressive. It poses a central threat because we passionately believe that America's well-being — and the American Jewish community's well-being — are dependent on liberal values, civil liberties, protection of minorities, cultural pluralism, tolerance, debate, evidence,

reason, fairness, and meritocracy. These values are good for America and good for American Jews. The decline of the liberal order threatens both. The passions unleashed by an illiberal state of mind are never good for Jews. And history teaches that once Jew-hatred becomes normative, it is a flashing warning of democratic decay — the erosion of the democratic mindset.

4. The Road Ahead

The road ahead will be difficult and painful. Years of healing await us. We cannot even begin to heal — we cannot move past October 7 — until the war ends, the hostages are restored, commissions of investigation are launched, and those responsible for the colossal failures own their responsibility and resign.

My message to you is: keep the faith. We are not the first Jews, only the latest Jews. We have seen all this before many times. We are part of a three thousand-year-old civilization — often despised, always small, but great in so many ways. We are a resilient and courageous people. We are optimistic. We invest in the future. We are productive and involved in society. We will overcome and prevail.

I hope that this hardship reawakens and reinforces what Israel and Judaism mean to you. I hope that you will recommit to Jewish life — and renew your understanding of the preciousness of your inheritance — the gift of generations past who withstood hardships greater than ours — and whose determination and steadfastness bequeathed Judaism to you.

As my plane lands next week at Ben Gurion airport, looking over the old new land, green and bursting with color from the winter rains, I will recite in my mind those immortal words from the Book of Amos, as I do every time I cross the shore of the Mediterranean in our final descent into this miracle of a country:

I, God, will restore My people Israel. They shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine. They shall till gardens and eat their fruits. And I will plant them upon their own soil, nevermore to be uprooted from the soil I have given them.