

Bereshit: Hearts Stretched to Breaking

Looking back over the past seven days, it feels like I've been engaged in a week-long wrestling match in my heart. Last Saturday, unbearable news began trickling to us from Israel. Then it became a rush. And then a deluge. Each new piece of information added to the sense of being emotionally overwhelmed. We were flooded by the onslaught of tragedy and horror brought by terrorists against innocent Israeli civilians.

As events unfolded over subsequent days, it was a struggle to name what I was feeling. I was in utter turmoil. It felt as though I was being pulled in completely opposite directions; my heart was breaking. When I sat down to prepare for Shabbat, I was burdened by this terrible weight. Yet, as I explored this week's readings, I found a new clarity emerging within myself.

I don't want to get your hopes up – I don't have any answers for how to create peace between Israel and its neighbors. What I can share is the process of discernment that brought me a new sense of grounding. I offer this reflection in the hopes that it might help you engage with your own feelings in the wake of the savage attacks against Israel and as we prepare for whatever events the future may hold.

This week, there are two possible haftarah readings. One of them is the standard reading for *parashat Bereshit*, this week's Torah portion (recommended by the [Reform Movement](#)). The other is for *machar ha-chodesh*, literally when "the [new] month is tomorrow". This is a passage that's read when Shabbat is the last day of the old month. With the new month of Cheshvan beginning at sundown, this traditional text is also an option. Both of these readings are valid and each has a very different message.

The portion that we will read today opens by mirroring the language of Creation from our Torah portion. The prophet Isaiah ([42:5-43:10](#)) recounts how God created the heavens, the earth and all people. A little

later on, however, the theme shifts as Isaiah personifies God as a warrior.

There are many places in Jewish texts where God is described with militant imagery. One of the most dramatic is in the Song of the Sea, where God is described as an *ish milchama* – a person of war (Ex. 15:3). While this metaphor generally doesn't work for me, I was surprised to find that it strongly connected with some of what has been in my heart this week.

Here are three verses from this haftarah portion that were particularly evocative for me: *God goes forth like a warrior, inciting passion like a fighter—yelling, roaring aloud, to prevail over God's enemies. (42:13) For I, the Eternal, am your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Redeemer. I give Egypt as ransom for you, Ethiopia and Sheba in exchange for you. Because you are precious to me, and honored and I love you, I give up peoples and nations in exchange for your life. (43:3-4)*

God as a warrior, God as the one who will ransom our captives, God who will redeem us from enemies... I teared up reading these passages. They connected with the part of myself that wants revenge against those who hurt and killed innocent civilians in Israel. This is the same part of myself that wants the hostages brought home safely and immediately.

These words from Isaiah helped me to describe some of what I've been holding inside: my feelings of fear and anger as well as my desire to protect my community in Israel. And yet, I knew there was more than this within me; a lot more. That brings us to the second haftarah portion.

This text comes from [1 Samuel 20:18-42](#). It's from the story of David and Jonathan. Jonathan's father, King Saul, hates David and wants him dead. He sees his son's friendship with David as a betrayal. Despite this, Jonathan saves David, promising always to care for him. As Jonathan

says to David, “Behold, God is between us now and forever.” (1 Sam 20:23)

As I read the story this week, I understood Jonathan to be telling David, “No matter where you are or what happens in the world, God’s Presence flows between us, maintaining our relationship. Even though my father would have us be enemies, I reject his words. We will always be connected.” And, once again, I found tears in my eyes.

This story of Jonathan and David connects with the part of me that rejects calls from authority to hate. It’s the facet of my heart that defies attempts to objectify others, to see them as less than human. It’s the aspect of my soul that holds close to the reminder that there are innocent people in Gaza, as well as in Israel. I ache for the suffering that both have endured as a result of *sinat chinam* – of baseless hatred. And as we mourn for the victims of violence in Israel, I fear for what those in Gaza might be forced to experience.

The teaching that God is manifest in human relationships is all the more relevant as this week’s portion reminds us that we – each and every human being – are **ALL** made in the Divine Image. Expanding on Jonathan’s words, God’s Presence flows between and among us all. Even more, I can see that this Presence is integral to our shared humanity: a part of our being that we have always had and will always have in common.

To recap, we find two very distinct teachings in these two haftarah texts. One is language of God defending us as a warrior, taking vengeance on our enemies and returning our captives. One is about love and friendship between two very different people; a relationship that transcends politics and class and anger and fear.

Each of these texts expresses a part of the feelings I’ve held in my heart. At one point, they felt incompatible to me. After all, how can we hold a call to war and a call to love within ourselves at the same time? How can they both be valid?

Yehuda Amichai's [beautiful poem](#), "Adam B'Chayav" – generally translated as "A Man in His Life" – offers us some inspiration:

*We need to love and to hate at the same moment,
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,
to make love in war and war in love.
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest
what history
takes years and years to do.*

So where does that leave me? Where does it leave any of us?

As I said, I don't have any answers (although I do enjoy sharing questions with you). What I can offer are a few thoughts. I hope they give some support in the process of making meaning during this tumultuous time. And perhaps they might even offer some comfort.

First, Judaism encompasses the full range of the human experience. It is broad enough and resilient enough to span every aspect of the human heart. I've felt some easing – a slight easing – of the tension within me by recognizing that these texts all exist exactly because others before me have needed their guidance as well.

Knowing that I am not alone in this experience – that others have walked this same road – gives me a sense of strength. As Amichai tells us, it's not only possible, but it is also very human to hold different, and even seemingly irreconcilable, perspectives at the same time. This is part of who we are. Our challenge is to allow ourselves to come to awareness of what we're holding inside and work towards balancing those feelings as best we can.

I want to be very clear on this point. It is completely valid to want both to protect those living in Israel while also praying that the upcoming Israeli

response in Gaza is measured, with mindful care for innocent lives there. Both of these inclinations are rooted in Jewish texts and values. Each of them can find support in the haftarah readings for this very Shabbat.

Let's also remember one of the profound spiritual truths from these opening chapters of Genesis: all people are made in the Divine image. This is key to the ethical Jewish perspective; it is also a profound challenge. It requires us to resist the temptation to dehumanize those who stand against us. This is a time for us to hold fast to this profound strength of our tradition, despite brutal provocation.

This morning, I read [an article in the New York Times](#) that made this point with exquisite poignancy. It quoted the Israeli director of a hospital near Gaza who treated a wounded Hamas gunman before sending him to a military hospital as saying: "It's not so simple to treat casualties and attackers in the same facility. But we are humans. We have to look at our values and not lose them along the way."

A second thought is that, in addition to the guidance offered by Jewish tradition, we can find reassurance and comfort in another very important place: our community. To be honest, I'm not sure that I could have made it through this week if I had been in isolation. Looking back over all we've experienced, I feel grateful for the many moments when we came together, both in person and online:

- This past Shabbat, when we gathered for study and services as we began grappling with unfolding tragedy;
- Last Sunday morning, when we offered each other the gift of our ears and hearts when we assembled with love and care;
- Last Sunday evening, when we danced with the Torah in the company of the HiBuR students. While we reduced our joy, we affirmed the outpouring of love and uplift that flowed between our guests and one another;

- Through the week, as we shared emails and phone calls, scheduled and spontaneous conversations, lists of organizations to whom to donate in their support of those most vulnerable in Israel;
- Thursday at Hasidic Tales, as we offered our teaching in honor of those whose lives had been lost and dedicated our experience to finding strength to work for peace;
- Friday night, as the HiBuR students cooked and served us a true feast before services; a celebration of the enduring connections that we share; and
- Today, as we reaffirm our connection to Torah – our light and guide in the dark places.

Now, more than ever, join in all that we are offering, whether in person or online. This coming week will close with Shabbat Rinah and much delight beyond; no matter what the next few days hold, that there will be some sparks of light at their end.

So come! Truly, the best and most enduring balm for a breaking heart is the embrace of our community. Let's freely share Judaism's great antidote to difficult times; the blessing of offering presence to one another.

As a third point, let us also remember that there were those beyond our community, including clergy, emergency services and local government, [who extended their support](#) to us as well.

For now, as we look to the coming week, let's remember that we, all humankind, are made in the same Divine image. Just as was said at the High Holidays, let us be kind to one another, offering those in our community (and those who we encounter beyond our walls) our care and gentle strength.

I can think of no better blessing with which to close than the [words offered by my teacher, Rabbi Sharon Cohen-Anisfeld](#) (President of Hebrew College) at this week's rally for Israel on the Boston Common:

*I know that so many of us are feeling heartsick and unmoored.
In the face of our sense of helplessness,
it is all too easy for us to weaponize our words against each other.
One word to the left, one word to the right can feel like a betrayal, an
unbridgeable gulf.
Please let us not turn our words against each other.
In this time of still unfolding terror, may we turn toward one another
with love.*

*May we choose our words carefully and with compassion.
May we resist the temptation to despair.*

*Please God, may this Shabbat somehow bring with it an opening toward
peace.*

And, together, let us say: *amein.*