

Shabbat Sermon by Rabbi Aaron Potek, Senior Rabbi at Sixth & I – October 13, 2023

Sixth & I is a diverse community, certainly when it comes to the issue of Israel. In this especially painful moment, when tensions are beyond high, I fantasized about being able to offer a single message that might bring us all together. But I quickly realized that the strength and beauty of this community doesn't come from uniformity but rather from everyone bringing their full self into this space, ready to encounter and even learn from our differences. I also realized that different people in this community need different things right now.

So instead of offering a single message tonight, I'll do my best to address those different subgroups and their different needs. I hope everyone feels represented and seen at some point tonight, and in the moments where you don't feel seen, where you might even feel challenged, please remember that being in a diverse community that respects differences is not easy, but it's arguably the most important thing we can do to help heal our very broken world.

First, to those who have lost loved ones this past week:

Your pain, your grief, your loss, is at the front and center of our hearts and minds tonight. Amidst all the news and the noise, it's easy to forget that so many human lives have been cut short - some brutally and intentionally, all tragically. The loss of a life, any life, our tradition teaches, is the loss of an entire world. You have a right and an obligation to grieve, however you need, no matter how many people try to diminish or dismiss your loss.

Tonight, you who are holding loss from the violence of this past week are not alone in your grief. All of us here, all of us watching, all of us in the Jewish community, here and around the world, all of us are holding you in your pain.

Tonight, we make the space for you to grieve, recognizing that grief takes many forms. We'll do our best to be with you in it, wherever you are. We'll feel your pain, your anger, your despair, your sadness, your devastation. We'll cry with you, scream with you, be silent with you. We are with you. Your loss is real. Your loss is our loss.

To those who have loved ones who have been captured:

Freeing captives is one of the greatest commandments in Judaism, more than feeding the hungry. Our hearts break with you and for you as you try to move forward in this fog of pain, fear and uncertainty. We are praying for the freedom of the over 170 hostages currently being held. We urge the Israeli government, the American government, any government of conscience, to do what it can for these people, some of them elderly and small children. As the New York Times [wrote in its briefing Wednesday morning](#): "There is no recent precedent for the scale of the hostage situation in the Gaza Strip... No modern government — not even the world's most brutal, like those in Russia or North Korea — has used hostages in this way: as human shields, under threat of public execution."

We pray for their release, and we refuse to abandon hope.

To those who have loved ones who have been hurt or wounded from the violence of this past week:

There are thousands of wounded people in Israel and in Gaza, all created in the divine image, with tens of thousands of people working night and day to keep them alive and to help them heal. We pray for their full and speedy recovery, in body and in spirit.

To those **who are confused about what's happening in Israel and Gaza right now:**

It's OK to not know.

On the Jewish holiday of Passover, we read about four archetypal children, representing four different types of people who might be at a passover seder. The fourth and final is the *sheino yodel lishol* - the child who doesn't even know how to ask.

There is a lot of shame in not knowing something, especially when everyone else seems to know everything and expects you to know the same. First of all – and a good reminder for all kinds of situations - many people who act like they know what they are talking about actually have no idea what they are talking about. Don't be intimidated by confident ignorance.

Second, fight the shame, which tends to spiral and demotivate. Instead, try to transform that feeling into curiosity. Right now is as good a time as any to learn about what's going on. Read from different news sources. Talk to friends with different perspectives. As is true on most issues these days, there is a lot of misinformation out there, so check your sources. Also, beware of simplistic narratives. Try to empathize with differing positions. Our Talmud teaches us that the great sage Hillel would first teach the opinion of his opponent before teaching his own. Being able to hold multiple narratives is a Jewish value.

Most importantly, don't let yourself be bullied into an opinion you don't actually hold. Be open to changing what you believe, but be true to what you believe. If others disagree with you, how they disagree will say a lot about the opinion they hold.

To those **who are Jewish and are feeling alone and afraid:**

It's a scary time to be Jewish. This past week we've witnessed horror that feels familiar and personal. It's hard to know who around us is with us for the right reasons, who is with us for the wrong reasons, and who is against us. Our long history of antisemitism doesn't help us navigate this moment or encourage us to trust others, and rightfully so. Many of us literally carry the terror, grief, and trauma in our DNA.

The natural response to all this is to self-isolate. But I'd encourage you not to. Now is not a time to be alone. Now is a time to be in Jewish community. Because you aren't alone, and showing up in community will remind you of that. You might not agree with everyone in the room - in fact, I can guarantee you won't. That's part of what being in a community is about - it's not about you. We need community right now to pull us out of our isolation.

I'd also encourage you to connect to your Judaism. You are the inheritor of a brave, resilient, loving, stubborn people who have chosen, time and time again, to live our values no matter the cost. Who have chosen, again and again, to light a candle in darkness. Who have chosen, again and again, hope in the face of hopelessness. We have survived unspeakable trauma, and we will survive this one, too.

To those who are **disengaged or uninterested in everything that is happening in Israel and Gaza right now:**

Perhaps you're understandably overwhelmed with the flood of information coming at you. Perhaps you are dealing with other pain that is more local and relevant to you. Perhaps you have other issues you care about more. Perhaps you are just tired of feeling upset, sad, or hopeless.

I get it. I'm tired of needing to know what to think, what to feel, what to say. I'm tired of being roped into heated conversations and debates that I don't want to have. I'm tired of having to talk about this, instead of getting to talk about this week's Torah portion, which this shabbat is the beginning of Genesis, as we restart our yearly cycle of reading through the entire Torah. I'm tired of antisemitism. I'm tired of hatred. I'm tired of violence. I'm tired of war.

But what happened to the Jewish people on Saturday was horrific and historic. It was the single largest loss of life resulting from a foreign attack on Israeli soil. It was Israel's 9/11. It was the single deadliest day for Jews worldwide since the Holocaust.

I can't make you care about something you don't care about. But if you care about Judaism, about Jews, about human life, about fighting back against hatred, you really *should* care.

To those of you **who aren't Jewish and are wondering how to support your Jewish friends right now:**

On behalf of all Jews - thank you, we appreciate your love, support and allyship. That said, please remember that we're not a monolith. Some of us have family and friends in Israel. Some of us do not. Some of us have been to Israel. Some of us have not. Some of us know a lot about Israel, have lots of opinions and feelings about Israel, and care a lot about Israel. Some of us do not. Jews are hurting right now, but exactly how we're hurting depends on the person.

So what can you do?

- You can ask if we know anyone who's been affected by the violence there.
- You can ask us how we're feeling and try your best to empathize.
- You can ask us what we need.
- You can donate to causes that are helping victims.
- If nothing else, you can let us know you're thinking of us.

I know many of us would also appreciate it if you took a stance against brutality and hatred. Which leads me to address my next subgroup of folks who might be here tonight:

To those **who haven't condemned the horrific attacks by Hamas:**

I know everything is political these days, but surely there must still be events and acts that rise above political divides. Last Saturday, Hamas militants barbarically slaughtered over 1000 Israeli civilians, including children and the elderly. I am horrified, furious, and, frankly, dumbfounded that anyone with a conscience, anyone who claims to care about human rights, about human suffering, about justice, about peace, could choose any response other than condemning Saturday's attack in the strongest possible terms.

When you refuse to condemn the terrorism of Hamas targeting innocent civilians, you are saying that any and all of Israel's 9.7 million citizens have forfeited their right to live, simply for being Israeli. You are saying that Israel's actions are so egregious, more than any other country in the world, that its entire population is a justified target. Is that really what you think?

Hamas's goal is war and terror. Do not be fooled into thinking that you have to support or defend Hamas's actions in order to care about Palestinians or their cause. If your fight for liberation necessitates the brutal slaughter of over 1000 innocent civilians, it's time to abandon that approach and find a better one.

To be clear, I'm not asking you to abandon your liberal and progressive values. I'm just asking you to apply them consistently across the board, and to stop making exceptions when it comes

to Israel. If you're against collective punishment, then be against Hamas's collective punishment of Israel. If you're against victim blaming, don't blame Israeli victims. If you're against war crimes, take a stand against war crimes against Israelis, too.

You can have political disagreements with the state of Israel or with the government of Israel. I certainly do. But if your political beliefs prevent you from calling out the inhumane acts of rape, kidnapping and murder, you have crossed a moral line and have lost your humanity.

Yes, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is complicated. Yes, what Israel should do next is complicated. Yes, how to achieve lasting peace in that region is complicated.

But the **intentional** targeting of over 1000 innocent Israeli civilians?

That is not complicated. It's horrific. And it must be condemned unequivocally.

To those **who are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, are concerned about Israel's next steps and are worried about the loss of innocent Palestinian lives:**

Your caring about Palestinian suffering does not make you anti-Israel. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. It makes you human. And we desperately need more humanity right now.

Caring is not a zero-sum game. In fact, the opposite. I believe that caring about Israelis necessitates caring about Palestinians. Both people have a right to dignity, to freedom, to justice, to self-determination, to peace. Our destinies are inextricably linked.

There are *2 million* Palestinians in Gaza right now, without food, water, or electricity. We can also care about them. We must also care about them.

To those **who say that now is not the time for nuance:**

This past week, I've heard, more times than I can count, "Now is not a time for nuance." As someone who loves nuance, who can't *not* see nuance, I respectfully disagree.

I understand the fear of nuance. Nuance can complicate what isn't complicated. Nuance can divide us. Nuance can stall necessary action.

But this past week, nuance has felt both horribly lacking and horribly needed. Not all Palestinians are Hamas. Not all Palestinians live in Gaza. Not all Jews are Israelis. Not all Israelis are settlers or supporters of the current government. Israeli's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza can be morally wrong and still not justify the murder of innocent people. Palestinians can also commit war crimes. We can dislike the current Israeli government but still support its right to defend its people. We can support the current government's right to defend its people but still be terrified about the calculations it and its far-right leaders are going to make in the coming days and weeks. We can believe Israel's war against Hamas is justified, while also believing that does not give it *carte blanche*.

We already live in a society where the loudest, most extreme voices get all the attention. Please, let's hold on to nuance. It's needed now more than ever.

To those **who are consumed with thoughts of hate and revenge after Saturday's attack:**

I can empathize. I've had moments, throughout my life, including this past week, of being consumed by rage.

That hate might be justified. As we read in the book of Ecclesiastes (3:9) on the day of the Hamas attack, which was also the holiday of Shemini Atzeret: “There is a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.”

Maybe now is a time for hate and a time for war.

But I’m scared about what will become of us if we let hate consume us.

I’m not talking about what political, military steps Israel should take next. I’m not talking about policies. I’m talking about our souls. What will that hate do to our souls?

I fear it will consume us. Blind us. Which, of course, is Hamas’s goal. To create more hate.

I hope and pray that we can rise above our basest desires. As we’re told in an ancient midrash (Avot d’Rabbi Natan 23:1): “One who conquers one’s desire is considered as if they have conquered a city full of warriors. The true warrior... is one who can turn an enemy into a friend.”

Overcoming the desire for revenge is a heroic feat, one I can’t expect from anyone, certainly not someone mired in grief, certainly not now. I realize now may not be the time for peace.

But let’s not lose sight of peace. Let’s not forget peace. We have been at war for so long, I fear we’ve forgotten it. Yes, there is a time for war. But that time must come to an end. There must also be a time for peace. Peace will not be easy. Peace will require painful compromises. We will have to fight for peace as hard as we fight for war. A new generation will decide to end this cycle of violence. Perhaps we are up to that heroic challenge.

Thank you to all of you for being here tonight, or for watching online. Thank you for trusting Sixth & I to hold this space for you, wherever you are at. We will continue to try to hold space for you in the difficult weeks ahead. Please stay connected to us, to each other, even when it’s hard. Especially when it’s hard Resist isolation or retreating to echo chambers. We will need each other and this community to carry us forward.

Shabbat shalom.