

Like every rabbi I know, I have been dreading this sermon. The one about Gaza. For months my colleagues and I have agonized over how to approach a subject that is so painful in so many ways.

With that in mind, I want to begin by asking you to notice how you're feeling right now. Has the word "Gaza" itself caused your stomach to clench or your heart to beat a little faster? What happens in your body when you listen to disagreements about Israel and Zionism? Are you able to reflect calmly on different positions and assess both what resonates with you and what doesn't from a range of perspectives? Or do you shut down with a sense of being unsafe or attacked?

Even American Jews whose families never experienced the Holocaust or who have never personally been threatened by antisemitism have learned trauma responses to certain ideas or information. We have been told we are unsafe if people disagree with our views, especially on Israel and Zionism. But it is essential to be able to distinguish actual danger from verbal conflict.

In her book *Conflict is Not Abuse*, scholar Sarah Schulman relates her experience at a workshop for survivors of domestic abuse. The facilitator, Martha Hodes, asked the participants, "Are you unsafe or uncomfortable?" Schulman says how important that question was to her and goes on to ask:

Does the person feel unsafe when they are not actually unsafe, but rather because the other party, with whom they are in conflict, is bringing up issues about their life that are troublesome and therefore initially feel overwhelming and difficult to face? Which kind of safety are we endorsing here? Is it the safety from...actual harm? Or is it the safety from being uncomfortable by accurate information that challenges one's self-perception?

Schulman then concludes:

Being reminded that one was once in danger has to be differentiated from whether or not one is currently in danger. Confusing the two is a situation that quickly becomes destructive. Being conscious about one's own traumatized past experiences, and how they manifest into current

traumatized behavior, can be a force for awareness of one's own reactions, not a means of justifying the repression of information.¹

As I speak this morning, I ask you to keep this distinction between safety and comfort in mind. I promise you that nothing I say puts you in danger, despite what your body might tell you. I ask that you remind yourself to breathe and know that listening to me does not mean you agree with me. But you can't truly listen if you're focused on preparing your disagreement. Some of you may have heard me repeat the line, "Jews don't listen, they wait." This morning, I ask that you listen, and wait until after you've really heard me to muster the arguments against what I say. You might even find that you agree with some of it.

When I was growing up in Buffalo, the largest ethnic group in the city was Polish Americans. From an early age, I absorbed the message that they were stupid and hated Jews. Family friends who were Holocaust survivors assured me that Poles were "worse than the Germans." This prejudice deepened when, later in life, I learned that Polish civilians took the initiative in murdering their Jewish neighbors both during and after the war.

At the same time, I heard from Polish Buffalonians the story of their own victimization. While Nazis didn't place them as low on their racial hierarchy as Jews, they still considered Poles inferior and subjected them to forced labor and deportation. The Germans murdered Polish political, cultural, religious, and intellectual leaders, kidnapped children who appeared "Aryan" to be adopted in Germany, and closed universities and secondary schools, prohibiting any higher education. A United States Holocaust Memorial Museum publication on Polish victims of the Nazis notes that, while exact numbers are difficult to determine:

¹ Sarah Schulman, *Conflict is Not Abuse*, Arsenal Pulp Press

Today scholars of independent Poland believe that 1.8 to 1.9 million [non-Jewish] Polish civilians were victims of German occupation policies and the war. This approximate total includes Poles killed in executions or who died in prisons, forced labor, and concentration camps. It also includes an estimated 225,000 civilian victims of the 1944 Warsaw uprising, more than 50,000 civilians who died during the 1939 invasion and siege of Warsaw, and a relatively small but unknown number of civilians killed during the Allies' military campaign of 1944-45 to liberate Poland.²

The Poles were certainly victims of the Nazis. But for most of my life it infuriated me that they did not acknowledge that they were also victimizers. How difficult could it be to acknowledge that truth?

Well, now I know.

We all want to be the hero of the story we tell about ourselves. But sometimes we're not the hero. Like all human beings, we are imperfect. We hurt others and we are hurt. Repairing those hurts is what this season is all about. But as Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg observes:

Addressing harm is possible only when we bravely face the gap between the story we tell about ourselves—the one in which we're the hero, fighting the good fight, doing our best, behaving responsibly and appropriately in every context—and the reality of our actions. We need to summon the courage to cross the bridge over that cognitively dissonant gulf and face who we are, who we have been—even if it threatens our story of ourselves.³

I now have much more empathy for those Poles who only wanted to see their victimization. Acknowledging the role they played in harming Jews would require telling a different story about themselves and their community.

² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Non-Jewish Victims: Poles,” <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/2000926-Poles.pdf>

³ Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair*, Beacon Press

I have that empathy because I have had to change my own story. I can no longer be self-righteous.

In his book *Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza*, Peter Beinart observes: "The problem with our communal story is not that it acknowledges the crimes we have suffered. The problem is that it ignores the crimes we commit."⁴ Like the Poles, we have focused only on our own oppression while being unable or unwilling to recognize how we have oppressed others. And, more specifically, how Jews bear responsibility for the terrible harm done to Palestinians.

I believe that the reason there has been so much pushback and contention over the use of the term "genocide" to describe what is happening to Palestinians is not actually about the definition. As you may know, the term "genocide" was created by lawyer Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew. He thought it imperative to create a category of crime that targeted people because they were members of a specific group. Lemkin's definition, which became the basis for the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, is the following:

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- Killing members of the group;
- Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.⁵

⁴ Peter Beinart, *Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza*, Penguin Random House

⁵ United Nations, "Definitions of Genocide and Related Crimes, <https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/definition>

My purpose this morning is not to convince you one way or the other that Israel's actions in Gaza constitute genocide. My concern is with why the word arouses such antipathy and distress.

One reason is that, in our minds, the Holocaust is the defining example of what constitutes genocide. If there is not mass, industrial killing accompanied by a clear ideology of hate, then it doesn't qualify as genocide. Yet I don't believe that any of us would deny that what happened in Armenia or Rwanda was genocide.

But I believe the deeper reason this is so hard for us is not because, given the objective facts, we would necessarily disagree that genocide is occurring in Gaza. It's because it's nearly impossible for us to believe or allow ourselves to know that Jews could commit genocide. That Jews might not be the good guys in this story.

In her book on conflict, Sarah Schulman discusses what prevents individuals from taking in information that requires them to change their self-conception. For those who are used to power over others, that information is experienced as a challenge to their power. If they are in a position to do so, they suppress that information. Think about the current debates over how we understand American history.

But the situation that speaks more directly to our Jewish experience is that of trauma. Schulman observes:

There is a strong element of shame in trauma that makes thinking and behavior so inflexible. The person cannot accept adjustment, an altering of their self-concept; they won't bear it and they won't live with it. And if their group, clique, family, community, religion, or country also doesn't support self-criticism, they ultimately can't live with it.⁶

⁶ Schulman, Ibid.

To put it in Jewish terms, shame can prevent us from doing *teshuvah*—from accepting that we have done harm to others.

Family therapist John Bradshaw has described shame as the inability to distinguish between making a mistake and being a mistake.⁷ If we think doing harm means we are fundamentally flawed, then we become unable to acknowledge the harm we do, which, in turn, prevents us from working to repair it. If, in contrast, we accept the fact that we, like all human beings, are imperfect and make mistakes—including those that hurt others—then we can feel a sense of responsibility to repair the damage we've caused without being consumed by shame. As Schulman observes:

Why does one person approach a situation and want reconciliation and peace, while another approaches the same situation and needs to shun, destroy, and thereby feel victorious? People who come at conflict from [a sense of responsibility] approach it very differently than people who come at it from shame. People who come at it from [responsibility] very much want to negotiate, are able to apologize and admit fault, can make concessions, and are invested in positive resolution. People coming from shame, on the other hand, direct anger, aggression, and blame towards the other party. People who feel [responsibility] experience less emotional stress and anxiety than those who feel shame. And [responsible] people can therefore focus more on the implications of their own actions on others. They found that those who feel shame also feel more threatened and are deeply concerned about what other people think of them.⁸

Applying this insight to the story we have learned about Israel, we confuse the possibility of Israel making mistakes with the assertion that the State of Israel is a mistake. If Jews only deserve a state because they have been victims, then being aggressors means they don't deserve to have one. Or, to put it in even starker terms: if Jews need a state because they have been the

⁷ John Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, Health Communications

⁸ Schulman, *Ibid*.

victims of genocide, then what is the purpose of that state if it, in turn, commits genocide against others?

Another way to look at this—the way of responsibility rather than shame—is to say that no state behaves morally, especially in war. If the continued existence of states depended on the morality of their actions, there would be no states. But when governments act in particularly harmful ways—through aggression like Russia's attack on Ukraine, or supporting the existence of chattel slavery as in the pre-Civil War United States—responsibility requires doing something to change the nature of those states. The oppression of the Palestinians is not inherent in the existence of a State of Israel, but it has become a part of how that state has evolved.

This has enormous implications for us as Jews.

Rabbi Dr. Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor Emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary, wrote this summer:

The unremitting violence against helpless Palestinians in Gaza and their wholly innocent coreligionists on the West Bank will saddle Jews with a repulsive religion riddled with hypocrisy and contradictions. The messianism driving the current government of Israel is sadly out of kilter with traditional Judaism—and an utter moral abomination.⁹

Too many Jews have replaced allegiance to Jewish values with allegiance to a Jewish state acting in direct contradiction to those values. As Peter Beinart has observed, "Worshipping a country that elevates Jews over Palestinians replaces Judaism's universal God—who makes special

⁹ Rabbi Dr. Ismar Schorsch, "A Hard Tisha B'Av," <https://www.jassberlin.org/post/a-hard-tisha-b-av-rabbi-dr-ismar-schorschchancellor-emeritusjewish-theological-seminary-7-6-2025>

demands on Jews but cherishes all people—with a tribal deity that considers Jewish life precious and Palestinian life cheap."¹⁰

Support for Israel does not have to be support for that kind of state—a state that controls the lives of fourteen million people but accords full rights to only half of them. We can work for a different kind of Jewish state, one that upholds the basic Jewish values of equal dignity and respect for all its residents.

Today is Yom Kippur. The entire purpose of this day is to acknowledge that we have done harm and to commit ourselves to repair. We do not do this because we are mistakes, but because we make mistakes. Actions, not essence. Responsibility, not shame.

The story we tell about ourselves matters profoundly. It shapes what we can see, what we can acknowledge, and ultimately, what we can change. For too long, our communal story has cast us only as victims, never as those who can also victimize. This story has made us feel safe, but it has not made us whole. And it has certainly not made us just.

Changing our story can feel terrifying. It can feel like losing ourselves. But the opposite is true. When we can hold both truths—that we have suffered terribly and that we have caused terrible suffering—we become more fully human, not less. We honor our ancestors not by repeating their trauma, but by breaking its cycle.

I am not asking you to stop loving Israel. I am not asking you to abandon our people. By ending the oppression of Palestinians, we can relieve Israeli Jews—and by extension, Jews everywhere—of an enormous moral burden. We can spare young Israelis from the spiritual damage of being

¹⁰ Beinart, Ibid.

forced to degrade Palestinian fathers before their children's eyes or to hold back mothers as their family homes are torn down. We can free them from needing to escape to places like Kathmandu or Machu Picchu after their military service ends, desperately seeking distance from the memories of what they witnessed and participated in.

I am asking you to love Israel and our people enough to insist that we can do better. To insist that Jewish values mean something beyond tribal loyalty. To insist that a Jewish state must be measured by Jewish ethics.

The work of *teshuvah* is never comfortable. It requires us to face the gap between who we think we are and who we have actually been. But this is sacred work. This is the work that allows us to return—to our values, to our humanity, to each other, and to God.

Today, on this day of days, I ask you to be brave enough to listen. To sit with discomfort. To consider that the story we've been telling might need revision. Not because we are mistakes, but because we have made mistakes, and because we have the capacity—indeed, the obligation—to repair them.

May we find the courage to tell a more honest story. May we find the strength to face what we have done. And may we find the wisdom to build a future in which all people—Palestinian and Israeli, Muslim and Jewish and Christian—can live in dignity, safety, and peace.

G'mar chatimah tovah. May we all be sealed in the book of life.