Reading Genesis After October 7

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When a child is born, that child is received into waiting arms.

Even before the first cry, before the first glimpse of the world, a pair of hands is already there.

Long before law, before faith, before any word is spoken, there is this simple truth:

We do not come into the world alone.

And from our very first breath, we learn life's most fundamental lesson:

The strong care for the weak.

And with that knowledge, we enter the world.

Three years ago, at 6:29 in the morning on Simchat Torah,

We learned how thin the layer of trust beneath our lives can be.

It was not only the border that was breached.

Something more primal, something more fundamental,

was shattered.

The most basic promise was broken.

And those who should have been protected

stood alone.

We all knew what it meant to build a life in Israel.

That we live in the shadow of danger.

But beneath that knowledge, stood a deeper promise:

That those entrusted with our safety, would stand watch.

That those entrusted with our protection would protect.

That no one is ever left alone before the abyss.

That when the moment came, those who stood watch over our lives -

would be there.

Not because the world is safe,

We never believed that.

But because some things are meant to hold, even when the world falls apart.

And that promise was one of them.

And then came images from the valley of the shadow of death.

Images we will carry for the rest of our lives.

Just days earlier, on Sukkot, we had read the words of Ecclesiastes:

"The battle is not to the strong… but time and chance happen to them all."

And then the day we feared arrived.

The promise beneath our lives collapsed.

And we quickly learned that when one promise is broken, others begin to fracture with it.

Human order begins to unravel the moment the unimaginable becomes real.

Suddenly, even the most basic truths are no longer shared.

Even the Jewish conviction that every hostage must be brought home,

had been broken

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But no world collapses in a single day.

In his book: "The Fall", Albert Camus asks a haunting question:

Not how a downfall begins.

But whether it can be stopped.

Jewish tradition asks the same question.

When our rabbis read the opening of the Book of Esther, they were not interested only in the catastrophe that almost happened.

They wanted to know how it became possible.

So, they traced history back to its beginnings, looking for the moment the road to the abyss began

And this is their Midrash:

"Adam, first among creatures.

Cain, first among killers.

Abel, first among the killed."

And the list goes on, growing stranger with every name.

Until, at the very end:

"Ahasuerus, first among sellers "

Haman, first among buyers".

And at that point, the rabbis cry out:

Woe.

Not because evil had suddenly appeared.

Evil had always existed.

But because, for the first time, responsibility itself

had been put up for sale.

And when responsibility becomes a commodity, catastrophe is already on its way.

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In her recent book, "The Way of the Sun", Professor Amia Lieblich follows Israeli veterans of the Yom Kippur War who later became religiously observant.

War and faith are two of the forces that have shaped Israeli society more than any others.

Yet we have tended to think of them as separate stories.

This book asks what connects them,

and What emerges from the book, is this:

War changes people.

A person may return from war with the same biography, yet with an entirely different sense of identity.

War does not necessarily make people believers.

But it does make them question.

It brings to the surface questions that ordinary life allows us to ignore:

What am I meant to do with the life I have been given?

For war does not reveal only how fragile life is.

Sometimes, it forces us to ask what life is for.

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Today, with wounded faith, we opened a new year at the Israeli Rabbinical Program.

Not one of our students has pursued the rabbinate outside the shadow of war.

Our fourth-year students began their studies just a few days after October 7.

Our third-year students have known rabbinical school only under the shadow of an ongoing war.

Our second-year students began their studies, when it seemed the worst was behind us.

Instead, the war deepened, tearing away yet another layer of security and protection.

And our first-year students begin their journey today.

Like everyone else in this country, they begin without knowing what this year will demand of them.

We know only this:

The most important lessons of leadership will not be learned

in our classroom

But in the great beit midrash of history itself.

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In these past three years, we have seen what happens when the promise beneath our lives collapses.

And so this morning we say:

Not everything that falls will remain fallen.

Because we choose to be among those who lift.

To take a fallen world in our hands,

and raise it again.

We could read Bereshit as a story of creation.

But today, we read it as a story of restoration

Judaism has never been interested in how the world came to be

(Even the story of the birth of the world, we read like lawyers.)

Not only what was created.

But what was promised.

Not only how the world began.

But the agreement on which it stands.

In Hebrew, the word "agreement" (choze'e) carries two meanings:

First one is a contract;

But perhaps the deeper meaning is the second:

A vision of what lies ahead.

And so even if we have seen chaos,

Even if we have stood before darkness,

And over the abyss,

We know these are not the final words.

Because agreements must be read to the end.

And so, after all that has happened,

Even if little strength to believe remains,

In the aftermath of it all,

The light shall come.

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