

A short Sermon was delivered on Monday, 10-9-23, at the HUC-JIR, New York Campus.

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This is not the sermon I planned to give this morning. I planned to speak about Hebrew poetry Israeli poetry written here in America. Poetry that corresponds with our Jewish canon. About American-Israeli identity as it is reflected in my own poetry. But all this seems out of touch with our reality now in the midst of the horrible, terrifying events in Israel.

I have been in wars before - as a child 67, and 73 (Yom Kippur war), as a soldier in the first Lebanon war of 1982 and the first Gulf war of 1990, and as every other Israeli, through sporadic terror attacks. This war is different. I am different. Never before civilians are butchered, so many are kidnapped and taken hostage. It seems that as I grow older, my skin is thinner. My heart is torn. My ability to help in a meaningful way is diminished.

On Saturday night, I was meant to attend a social gathering. At some time during the day, I was asked if I could recommend a prayer for peace to read at the event. It wasn't until that moment that I was able to admit that no, I cannot make such a recommendation. No, I cannot, and I do not want at this time, to follow the most immediate sentiment I would normally have when war erupts. Something horrible has happened, is *currently happening* and it demands of me to pause and look deep into my innermost feelings and very scattered thoughts. What do I feel – shock, anger, frustration, sheer pain that turns my heart and guts.

At this moment, I do not think that it is a time for peace. There are countless children, mothers and fathers, young women and men, and old people, grandmothers and grandfathers, and soldiers that have been slaughtered and others who are taken hostage. As we speak there are still Hamas terrorists in Israeli towns and kibbutzim. The only thing that I can offer is to read Haim Nachman Bialk's verses from "On the Slaughter / על השחיטה"

וְאָרוּר הָאוֹמֵר: נָקָם!
נָקָמָה כְּזֹאת, נָקָמַת דָּם יֶלֶד קָטָן
עוֹד לֹא-בָרָא הַשָּׁטָן-
וַיִּקַּב הַדָּם אֶת-הַתְּהוֹם!
וַיִּקַּב הַדָּם עַד תְּהִמוֹת מַחְשָׁפִים,
וַאֲכַל בְּחֹשֶׁךְ וְחֹמֶר שָׁם
כָּל-מוֹסְדוֹת הָאָרֶץ הַנִּמְקִים.

And cursed be the man who says:
Avenge! No such revenge - revenge for
the blood of a little child - has yet been
devised by Satan. Let the blood pierce
through the abyss! Let the blood seep
down into the depths of darkness, and
eat away there, in the dark, and breach
all the rotting foundations of the earth.

And then the words from Kohelet echoed in my head:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.”

The words of Kohelet can be understood as a description, an observation of life as it unfolds. Saying – That is the nature of things. – In the history of each person or society there is birth and death, planting and reaping, love and hate... There is, however, a different way to read these sets of pairs – **as a prescription**, not a description. You, I, we, are charge by Kohelet to identify and act “the time to...”

It is relatively easy to call for a “time for love,” a “time to make peace.” It is an obvious part of our worldview, our calling to be good, kind, enlightened. It is aligned with the way we would like to perceive ourselves. BUT-- we are forced to recognize that there is also a “time to hate,” a “time [to wage] war,” and then to decide – What is the time now? And what is the meaning, what is our interpretation of “a time to hate,” “a time [to wage] war?!”

Are we able to admit that such a time exists? Can we let ourselves possess these kinds of feelings / dispositions? Can we deal with having these feelings?

To live as if these feelings are not part of us is to suppress them, to hide them, but it does not rid us of them, and therefore it means that we only lie to ourselves and to society. To admit that we possess these sentiments and thoughts is not only an imperative stemming from the quest to be honest with oneself, but because living as if these feelings and thoughts do not have a place in our psyche, in our life, is dangerous.

If we cannot tell ourselves that the feeling of hate, and the time to wage war do tragically exist, we risk a kind of cruelty disguised as righteousness, as “the right, the pragmatic, the correct thing to do.” We owe it to the families of the hostages and of the soldiers, to be able to contain “a time to wage war” until we can deliver life and secure peace. Kohelet is asking us to clarify, to discern the times we stand-up and decide the right time to do what and how?! What is war, what is hatred? And where do we direct it? Perhaps, towards what Bialik imagines is the “depths of darkness” and towards “all the rotting foundations of the earth.” And we owe it to ourselves, to be able to contain “a time to hate” until we can examine the rotten foundations that give rise to it.

We pray for the hostages, we pray for the citizens that live in fear of being murdered, or worse, the fear of being tortured to death. We pray that the Israeli army, an army whose mission is to defend the citizens of Israel, will return to its noble mission to defend life, after yet another, necessary, war.

Then may the words of the prophet be sound in the Land:

וְגַר זֵאֵב עִם-כֶּבֶשׂ, וְנֹמֵר עִם-גְּדִי יִרְבֹּץ; וְעִגְלָה
וּכְפִיר וּמְרִיא יִחְדָּו, וְנֹעֵר קֶטָן נֹהֵג בָּם. וּפְרָה וְדֹב
תִּרְעֶינָה, יִחְדָּו יִרְבְּצוּ יִלְדֵיהֶן; וְאַרְיֵה, כִּבְקָר
יֹאכֵל-תְּבֹן. וְשִׁעְשַׁע יֹנֵק, עַל-חֵר פְּתָן; וְעַל
מְאוּרַת צְפֹעוֹנִי, גְּמוּל יָדוֹ הִדָּה. לֹא-יִרְעוּ וְלֹא-
יִשְׁחִיתוּ, בְּכָל-הָר קֹדֶשׁי: כִּי-מִלְאָה הָאָרֶץ, דַּעַה
אֶת-יְהוָה, כַּמַּיִם, לַיָּם מְכַסִּים.

And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the babe shall play at the burrow of the asp, and the child shall put his hand on the basilisk's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea.