

Parashat Bereishit - Defending Our Lives

Rabbi Cara Weinstein Rosenthal

Temple Beth Shalom

October 14, 2023

It was supposed to be a good week. This past week was supposed to be a happy one for all of us in the Jewish community - a week filled with the promise of new beginnings.

Just one week ago, we were preparing to celebrate the joyful holiday of Simchat Torah, when we conclude the fall holiday season with a raucous celebration of our sacred texts. We were preparing to dance with the Torahs and take a break from our daily routines to focus on community and celebration.

But one week ago we woke up to news we could never have imagined - Israel was under attack in a comprehensive assault that involved horrific brutality, with hundreds dead or taken captive - with a death toll that is now over one thousand.

Many of us have spent the last seven days walking around in a fog of sadness, anger and fear, worrying about our friends and relatives in Israel, wondering if we, too, will be subject to violence as Palestinian leaders called for global acts of what they call "resistance."

We have been glued to the news and to social media, searching eagerly for updates that might give us some hope.

And now, it's Shabbat again, and we're here to celebrate Shabbat Bereishit, the Shabbat where we read the very first Torah portion of the Book of Genesis and we retell the story of the creation of the world and the birth of humanity.

I love Shabbat Bereishit. As many times as I've followed the cycle of Torah readings, the experience of starting over again and going back to the very beginning of our story still feels exciting to me. It feels like a new beginning, when we're able to approach our national story with fresh eyes and prepare to learn new things about even our most familiar narratives.

So here we are, and it's Shabbat Bereishit, and our excitement is tempered by sorrow and anxiety. It's hard to feel like this Shabbat symbolizes a fresh start when our global

Jewish community is dealing with the aftermath of a horrifying pogrom - as if we've somehow traveled back in time to 1902, or 1939.

And for me, and perhaps for you too, one of the most galling things about this whole terrible experience is the world's reaction.

Yes, we have people - both in our home community and in the public eye - who have been vocal in speaking out in support of Israel.

President Biden has been unequivocal in voicing American support for Israel. Some in the news media, like Anderson Cooper, have taken pains to expose the brutality of Hamas's actions to the world.

But for every individual or organization that has spoken out in Israel's defense, countless others have been silent - or have been openly critical of Israel, or have sought to try to find what they think is a middle ground by talking about "context" and "both sides" and "proportionality" - when we know that there is nothing proportional about any of this - there is nothing that can excuse or explain Hamas's brutality.

So what does Shabbat Bereishit mean to us this year? How can we process this Shabbat of new life and new beginnings in the midst of all that is happening in our world?

Parashat Bereishit starts with the basics - it tells the story of God's process of creating the world in six days. It talks about Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

And then, it tells the story of Cain and Abel.

Cain and Abel were Adam and Eve's two sons.

When they reached adulthood, each son took on a specific role. Cain became a farmer, and Abel became a shepherd.

Cain and Abel each brought offerings to God - Cain from his crops and Abel from his flock. We can imagine that each man was hoping to gain God's favor - but all did not go as planned.

The text says that Abel gave God מִבְּכֹרוֹת צֹאֲנוֹ וּמִחֲלִבְהֶן - the choicest of the firstborn animals of his flock. But it doesn't say that about Cain - it just says that Cain brought an offering מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה - from the fruit of the soil.

The text implies that both men gave something, but only Abel gave God the best of what he had.

The Torah tells us that God accepted Abel's offering but not Cain's offering. Cain was greatly distressed, and in his distress he rose up against Abel and killed him.

So - in the space of four chapters in the Bible, we've gone from the beauty and promise of a newly created world to the horrific story of the first murder. In the blink of an eye.

The Torah gives surprisingly little information about the murder. All we know is that Cain and Abel went out into the field together, and that Cain killed Abel.

The Midrash shares an additional piece of the story. In Bereishit Rabbah, Rabbi Yochanan teaches that contrary to what we might think, Abel was actually stronger than Cain.

Apparently, Cain attacked Abel, and the two brothers fought, but initially Abel had the upper hand - Cain was pinned underneath Abel.

Cain, trapped, played upon Abel's sense of mercy and familial love. Cain pleaded with Abel, "There are only two of us in the world - what will you say to our father if I am dead?"

Abel was filled with mercy for Cain and for their father and released Cain. Immediately, Cain struck Abel and killed him.

Rabbi Yochanan shares the moral of this story: "From there they say: Do not do a favor for a wicked person, and evil will not befall you."

The rabbis are saying: if you are faced with danger from a person who is threatening you - you don't need to let that person get the upper hand.

Yes, we are supposed to be compassionate. The rabbis said that Jews are supposed to be רחמנים בני רחמנים - we are supposed to be the most merciful people. But the rabbis remind us that we are never supposed to be so merciful that we let people harm us or take advantage of us. That is not what our religion asks of us.

This point is brought home by a mishnah in Tractate Sanhedrin of the Talmud. The mishnah states that if you find someone breaking into your home, you are permitted to kill that person in self-defense. The basis of this ruling is that you are only allowed to kill

someone who poses a mortal threat to you - but if someone is brazen enough to break into your home, you have to assume that they would try to protect themselves by killing you - and thus you can kill them.

The mishnah goes on to say that if the burglar is someone that you're sure would never try to kill you - like a friend or relative of yours who is stealing because they've been driven to a life of crime - then you are not permitted to kill them.

But if you can assume that the burglar is someone who is heartless enough to try to kill you, then you can kill him in self-defense. You don't need to stand around and wait for someone to save you - you can take matters into your own hands and save yourself.

The rabbis in the Talmud share an ancient adage that relates to this topic:

אם בא להורגך השכם להורגו -

"If someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him first."

Those rabbis weren't playing - and neither are we.

Judaism is a religion of peace. Our Ten Commandments explicitly state, לא תרצח - you shall not murder.

But our tradition makes it clear that this respect for life doesn't mean that we need to roll over and let people victimize us. Respecting other people's lives doesn't mean that we can't safeguard our own.

By sharing that teaching about the burglar, and the midrash about Cain and Abel, the rabbis were giving us permission to stand in defense of ourselves and our own people.

For two thousand years, until 1948, we Jews lived as a vulnerable minority in countless communities where we couldn't exercise that right to defend ourselves - we simply didn't have the power or the capability.

That's not the case now. Now we have the strength to protect ourselves, to refuse to be victimized. And that makes the world very uncomfortable. They're very disappointed in us for not laying down and dying.

The New Testament says, if someone strikes you on the cheek, you should turn the other cheek - in other words, you should give that person an opportunity to hit you

again. With all due respect to the Christian tradition - that is not the Jewish way.

I can't pretend to know why Christians promulgated that teaching - perhaps it's a teaching that makes sense for them and for their historical experience. And I do understand the greater point about humility and non-violence.

But this is not a teaching that make sense for us Jews, given the burdens that we carry in this world. We don't have the luxury of turning the other cheek. We'd be dead before we finished turning.

I'm on a Facebook group for female clergy from different faiths. Not surprisingly, the group has been awash this week with posts discussing the war in Israel. I'm grateful to report that many of my sisters in ministry have been expressing their support and sympathy, and their prayers that the war will end quickly and that Israel will be safe.

But there have been so many responses from the non-Jewish clergy on this group that really distill all of the condescending garbage that we hear from those who think they understand our own oppression better than we do.

Some people called for Israel to cease its military operations and be, essentially, the "bigger person."

Some talked about "proportionality" - about how Israel has to make sure that its response is proportional to the attack - as if the Israeli military has time to sit down with a big whiteboard and figure out mathematically exactly what the right proportion is for its acts of self-defense.

Many talked about the deplorable conditions for civilians living in Gaza. I actually agree that they are deplorable. I believe that the people of Gaza deserve to live in peace and that they, too, are being victimized by Hamas.

But no amount of poverty, no number of uncomfortable experiences at checkpoints, justifies the mass murder of Israelis and the targeting of Israel's most vulnerable citizens like children and the elderly and Holocaust survivors.

One minister who participated in the discussion posted a quote from Proverbs - a text that is sacred to my tradition and to hers.

The quote read, "Do not say, 'I will requite evil;' put your hope in the LORD and He will save you.

With all due respect to my colleague, I believe that this quote is taken wildly out of context. In the Book of Proverbs, it's talking about the way an individual should behave with regard to others in his community, and the imperative to create a community based on honesty and peaceable interactions with neighbors - it's not talking about a people that has been oppressed for 2000 years and is desperate to fend off more violence.

And this lack of understanding is emblematic of the ways in which much of the non-Jewish world is gaslighting us and minimizing the threat that Israel is under - and the ways in which that threat makes all Jews vulnerable.

My colleague the minister might do well to remember what God said to Moshe when the Israelites were standing at the Sea of Reeds, watching their Egyptian captors gaining on them.

The people cry out to Moshe in fear, and Moshe tells the people, "God will fight for you; you hold your peace."

And God corrects Moshe, and says,

מִהַתְצַעֲקָ אֵלַי דְבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ -

"Why are you crying out to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward."

God was willing to help us - but first we had to take action. We had to go forward. God, that's exactly what we're doing. We're going forward through the pain and trauma of war so that we can emerge into a future of peace and safety.

Please don't think that I enjoy the thought of killing anyone, or of our Israeli soldiers having to kill anyone. This is a reality that is very painful for them, and for us. As Golda Meir once said, "We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children. But we can never forgive them for forcing us to kill their children."

But we, and they, have a big burden to carry. We have six million voices calling to us from heaven, imploring us not to turn the other cheek, imploring us not to let our enemies get the upper hand.

We have to tell the world that when we said "Never Again," we meant it. "Never Again" is right now.

So what do we make of this Shabbat Bereishit? I think that even with everything going

on in Israel and in the world right now, this Shabbat is indeed a Shabbat of new beginnings.

Just look at what we're experiencing here at TBS today. If we want to assert our right to live, to survive, in the face of violence and oppression, what better way to do that than to be here together and to celebrate an aufruf and a Bar Mitzvah - to show that life goes on - that our lives will go on - and we will continue to live proudly and joyfully as Jews.

Mir veln zey iberlebn. We will outlive them. We will defend ourselves against hate and cruelty. We will survive. And together we will bring "Bereishit" - a new day, a new world. A world of life. A world of peace.

Shabbat Shalom.