

There is a passage from *Pirkei Avot*, the Jewish Ethics of the Fathers, that has long been a guide for me. It is Chapter 1, Mishna 17. *Shimon his son said: "All my days I have grown up among the Sages and I have not found anything as good for the body as silence. And not study but practice is the primary thing. And whoever multiplies words brings sin"*. I am not prone to breaking my silence unless I feel I'm not just multiplying words. I have felt frustratedly mute since October 7, 2023, trying to process what has unfolded since, but feeling more and more strongly that I wanted - needed - to say something about Judaism, Israel and the war in Gaza.

Perhaps I should have said something sooner, but that does not mean it is too late. No.

First, a bit about myself:

I grew up among Conservative and Orthodox Jews in the suburbs of New York City and Boston in the 1970s. Judaism permeated our lives back then and has remained an important part of my family's life. I went to Hebrew School twice a week and Shabbat services on Saturday. I loved the holidays and our opera singer cantor. Like many American Jewish boys my age I went to Israel around the time of my Bar Mitzvah, in particular to go daven (pray) at the Wailing Wall. I later studied Judaism in college.

I cried the first time I saw Jerusalem, and again when I had to leave.

So, my love for and bond with Judaism cannot be questioned. No.

I have visited Israel many times. My parents lived there for a semester. My sister lived there for a year. I tried to study there for a year but could not, due to war in Libya, which cancelled my program. We recently discovered we had long-lost relatives in Israel: my mother's cousin, and other extended family members who I met for the first time in 2018. That branch of her family walked from Eastern Europe to Israel in the early 1900s and were part of the founders of one of the first kibbutzim in Israel - where their descendants still live today.

So, my love for and bond with Israel cannot be questioned. No.

Unlike my relatives, the vast majority of Israelis are not Europeans. Israel may be a democracy linked to the US, but it is a Middle Eastern society of people born locally, now over many generations, where everyone is a soldier, or will be one. Otherwise, they are ultra-Orthodox Jews who are exempt from military service so they can study full time. It is nothing like Europe or America. No.

Furthermore, the Europe that my family walked away from over a century ago has been destroyed several times over since then. So, no. Nobody is going back anywhere.

Americans, when you think about the sense of patriotic duty to fight for your country, try to think back to the weeks after September 11, 2001. That's an approximation of how Israelis feel all the

time, and that's before the horror of October 7. Imagine if everyone here knew someone, one of the wounded or slaughtered, the raped and abducted. The ones taken hostage.

It didn't just end. It is forever. Before/after. For the families with hostages still missing it is still ongoing - they are cruelly suspended in time and horror, along with countless thousands of others in Israel and around the world.

No. It is not possible to understand what October 7 means to Israelis or to Jews, unless you are one. Sorry, but no.

As for my religion, I say that there is no one "Judaism". No. We have no leader. We have the Torah, and the Talmud and a great deal more writings to consult - many, many sources. While these texts are universal, in terms of practice and culture there are many "Judaisms" around the world that can at times be barely recognizable to each other. Being Jewish has always meant many different things based on location and culture among other things. Jewish groups from distant countries have seemed strange and foreign to each other - and clashed with each other - since the exiled Iberian Jews arrived at the gates of Rome five centuries ago. American Judaism and Israeli Judaism are not the same (nor is Italian Judaism for that matter) and neither can be narrowed down to such broad categories. No. As I find myself always saying when talking about Judaism, truthfully, but admittedly with some frustration, it really is more complicated than that. A lot more complicated.

So, most of us are not - and I include my very American/European self here - in a position to understand Israeli society or the forces that drive it. No. And I have exactly zero standing to comment on Palestinian society - which I doubt many outsiders really know much about.



Image: Jakayla Toney

In my view this means that we cannot judge the people, who we cannot understand. But that does not mean accepting all of their actions. No. To begin with, I don't accept aggressive violence

against the innocent, regardless of who the perpetrators are or their agenda. No.

On the other hand, Hamas is not beyond being judged. Their doctrine enshrines an unobtainable absolute goal: the destruction of Israel. This is not possible. They are wrong, and their choice of violence and terror against civilians is reprehensible. No.

The government of Israel is not above judgement either. They have adopted a disturbingly similar unobtainable absolute goal: the total destruction of Hamas. This is not possible. They are wrong. And the violence being carried out against the civilians of Gaza is unacceptable, and reprehensible. No.

It is not even remotely Jewish. I don't recognize anything Jewish in what is happening in Gaza. No. The attack of Oct. 7 is a day all Jews will remember. On this particular front we are wholly united. We all know about the pain of terror and the threat of violent death, the fear of the memory of the Shoah.

We know we are hated. But we will continue being who we are anyway, as we always have, no matter where we are chased to or from, or who attacks us or how. And I want to say that after everything Jews have been through as a stateless people forever on the move, knowing that there is one country - Israel - that will always say 'yes' to you when you ask for entry is something the significance of which non-Jews can't understand. No.

There are plenty of reasons for us to support Israel that cannot be summed up in the inane "pro-Palestine"/"anti-Zionist" dialectic that itself is utterly distorting all the real issues at hand. No. This really is much more complicated than that.

However, having said all of this, I have nonetheless reached a limit to how much I could see and read about the Israeli government's actions while remaining silent.

Now the destruction, cruelty, famine, despair and death in Gaza exceeds all nightmares, all worst-case scenarios, and apparently is poised to become even far worse.

No. No, no, no, no. I cannot accept this. I must say something.

I say this: it is not a question of politics, of left or right, it is now a question of humanity. There must be another way. There is no military solution, ever. Total victory cannot be achieved. It is a fiction, a false doctrine. What I see being done in Gaza, the catastrophe in Israel, it makes me want to scream: No. Not us. We should not be doing this.

If the reader is considering labeling me as anti- anything Jewish or Israeli at this point, please go back to the beginning of this piece before you do. I believe that's settled already. Those labels cannot be applied to me. No.

I am, however, opposed to the actions of the current Israeli government. I opposed Benjamin

Netanyahu's policies prior to October 7 and I vehemently oppose them now. I am pro-Judaism and pro-Israel, and that is beyond question. Yes, it's complicated, but in all honesty, looking at the human calamity that has been created in Gaza it is not so complicated anymore to think and to say that it is wrong. No.

It must stop. That is what I wish I could say, but who will listen?

So I say no.

No to war. No to Hamas and no to all who intentionally harm others to advance their political agendas. No to Netanyahu's messianic grip on power and Israel's fate. Netanyahu is a sworn enemy of legitimate Palestinian political power emerging in any form, never mind two states, and he has elevated a dangerously violent ultra-right-wing element into the highest levels of Israel's government.

Netanyahu's government is pro-war and anti-peace. Hamas is pro-war and anti-peace. To that I must say no.

No. That is my lament for Israel, for Judaism, for Gaza and its decimated people, and for all of us, because a terrible destruction is being wrought upon everyone and everything involved, including all of us Jews. So, now we have more pain, more anti-Jewish hatred we can share. Another grief to unite us in the new world of *after*, a world that is decidedly, for many of us, not of our choosing. No.

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