

Ramah New England's Statement on Israel

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Rabbi Gordon Tucker's D'var Torah on the Situation in Israel:

We are all dealing with very trying, frightening, and morally challenging days. So many of the members of our Ramah community are directly affected by the war that has been provoked by Hamas' unspeakable terrorism inside Israel, because we have family, friends and loved ones in Israel. But none are affected nearly as deeply and in ways that continue to threaten their lives, as soldiers and civilians, as the Israeli members of our community, and we owe them our love and support as human beings and as fellow Jews. We pray for their safety, and for an eventual peace that will move the needle of justice for everyone.

It is not easy to think dispassionately when the wounds of these despicable attacks are so fresh, and when the fate of the hostages is frighteningly unknown. And yet, the several values that we all stand for require us to think conscientiously about the battles that lie ahead. This moves me to make the following observations, and I begin — for reasons that will presently be clear — with two verses from the Book of Shemot (Exodus):

*And God did so the next day: **all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but of the livestock of the Israelites not a beast died.** (Exodus 9:6)*

*The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the riders—Pharaoh's entire army that followed them into the sea; **not one of them remained.** (Exodus 14:28)*

That's the way it often is when the Bible tells stories of conflict and battle. All of the "bad folk" are eliminated, and every one of the "good folk" survive. It's all so clean and neat.

Life, however, is not so clear cut. Just people die in just wars. And unjust people survive them as well. Those hard facts are the source of enormous moral wrestling and debate, when just causes cannot guarantee protection to all innocents, nor ensure the elimination of all bad actors.

Israel faces some choices at present, and none of them are good or easy. The best we can say is that some are worse than others. And we ought to be sufficiently humble to acknowledge that none of us would ever want to be facing those awful choices, all of which will surely take the lives of brave soldiers fighting in a just cause, and just as surely take the lives of innocent civilians in Gaza who are being used to shield the perpetrators and celebrators of horrendous crimes.

I trust we can agree — actually, as members of a Ramah community, we must agree — on two things at the outset:

- Beheading babies, gunning down at point blank range people who are huddled in a bomb shelter for protection from rockets, and kidnapping people of all ages to use and abuse them in ways known and unknown, are all acts that cannot be understood, condoned, or in any way justified. No amount of injustice done to Palestinians over the years can ever justify this kind of murderous rampage. There have been voices claiming that these acts of terror are somehow acceptable acts of resistance, but no Jew (indeed, no person of conscience) can stand by such a claim. Being a victim of injustice does not grant anyone a moral free pass.
- Israel has not only the right, but an obligation as a protector of its citizens, to fight to eliminate a terrorist organization that perpetrated these crimes, and whose charter calls for Israel's destruction and for the killing of Jews. No self-respecting state can stand by when such a sworn enemy is literally miles away from its borders, and that makes no pretense about its intention to inflict more cruelty and death. (And let's remember that the number of Israelis killed that day, all of whom (even the soldiers) were non-combatants, pro-rates to more than 30,000 deaths relative to the U.S. population). This means that Israel's war against Hamas is a just war. And note that we speak here of Israel's war with Hamas, not a war with Palestinians.

If we agree — as we must — on these two things, we can then proceed to consider what comes next, without exaggeration or sensationalism.

The war on Hamas is a just war. And, it is also axiomatic that not every act in a just war is automatically a just act. Does Israel have a responsibility to prosecute this war in a way that minimizes civilian deaths as much as possible? Yes it does, and all but the most extreme elements of Israeli society agree with that as well. How exactly one does that is one of the knottiest problems one can face. One possible approach, which is admittedly imperfect, is to warn those innocents to leave the areas with the biggest concentration of terrorist infrastructure. Israel has been doing that, even though they themselves recognize that this is neither simple nor a guarantee against harm or even death. Yes, there are serious humanitarian concerns when hundreds of thousands of people are forced to displace themselves to the southern sector of Gaza, where basic supplies are just as scarce as they are at their homes. But in these excruciating war scenarios, one must think of the alternatives. Which of the following is worse for the innocents: (1) to move from one area of severe hardship to another, or (2) to stay and play the role of human shield in front of terrorists who must be taken out? Another way to pose the matter is this: who right now cares more for the Palestinian civilians in Gaza — the Israeli army that is exhorting them to get out of the way of a just war, or Hamas that is urging them to stay and place themselves in the line of fire? Again, this is not to minimize the suffering of the innocents. But in the fight against an enemy sworn to kill us, and possessing a record of inflicting lives of misery on those same innocent Gazans, there may be no perfect or ideal choice.

We should care about Palestinian lives, and we should pray for those innocent lives just as we pray for Israeli captives, soldiers, and civilians who remain in harm's way. We should work for a just peace that recognizes and provides for the legitimate needs of the Palestinian people. That, too, is our long-term commitment as human beings, as Jews and as Ramahniks. And if there are actions taken by Israel going forward in its just war that may raise questions of morality in war, we should make it possible for lovers and supporters of Israel to have those discussions and debates should that time arise. But however one may wish to label and describe what is happening now, it is most definitely not "genocide". To call it that is to misunderstand what the word means. People bent on genocide do not urge people to evacuate a zone of immense danger. What's more, using the word "genocide" is to make genuine moral debate impossible, it is to condemn at the outset a war whose objective is a just one, and it commits the sin known in our tradition as "Motzi Shem Ra". That phrase means wanton slander, in this case slander of soldiers and their commanders who will be trying their best to kill or capture only the criminals, knowing the tragic truth that they will be unable to save every civilian who is being cynically used by those very criminals. And knowing as well that some of those very criminals may yet survive to act another day, God forbid.

When these battles finally subside, with God's help, there will be more sober discussions and debates. Let us be sure to remember that we are a community of committed Zionists all of whom share agitation and sleeplessness over Israel's security and well-being, and thus honor the diversity of views in our community of committed Zionists about mistakes of commission and omission that may have been made in the years and decades that have led up to this terribly painful situation.

Above all let's be more thoughtful about the words that we use. The moral debates among right, left, and center, which Ramah has always encouraged, will then be able to proceed when it is time to have them.

As Psalm 125 expresses the prayers we should have:

Do good, Lord, to the good, to the upright in heart. But those who in their crookedness act corruptly, let the Lord make them go the way of evildoers. May it be well with Israel. שלום על ישראל
