Fellow Creatures—Can We Not See One Another?

After another week of devastating violence in Israel and Palestine:
the only way forward is through the truth.

Bamidbar 5781 – May 15, 2021

There is a story that I think of often, told by George Orwell, about the time he was enlisted as a soldier in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. His commander positioned him on a certain strategic perch and ordered him to shoot any enemy troops that came within sight. He crouched and waited until he finally saw an enemy soldier jump out of the trenches and run, in full view. Orwell was about to shoot when he noticed that the man was holding up his pants with both hands as he ran. Suddenly, he couldn't shoot. He later explained: "I had come here to shoot at 'Fascists,' but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist,' he is visibly a fellow-creature, [not at all unlike me], and you don't feel like shooting at [a fellow-creature]."

A broken belt.

I can't stop thinking of that story.

Because what seems clear to me at the end of a week of anguish and heartache is that we are witnessing what happens when a whole society loses the ability to see the humanity in one another.

Which means that while others will debate best military and political strategy, I am going to focus, at least this morning, on what it means to lose the ability to see one another's humanity.

This didn't happen last week when Hamas's rockets started falling and the airstrikes began hitting Gaza. It didn't happen this past month, as the Damascus Gate was closed during Ramadan and the TikTok videos of Jews being attacked started going viral, or even as protests erupted in advance of a court ruling on the evictions in Sheikh Jarrah. You don't lose the humanity in another in a moment or a month, or even a year.

Dehumanization rises in a slow boil. It is cultivated over time.

Hamas doesn't distinguish between Lehava protesters shouting Death to Arabs and mango farmers, Shoah refugees, or the people working in high tech in Tel Aviv, trying to live a rich and meaningful Jewish life and build a more just and open society. That is dehumanization.

I know that many of you have felt this personally, whether you're in Tel Aviv, in LA or in Sydney. You, and we, are personally held responsible for every policy of Israel's right wing govt. Unless we lead with a firm disavowal of Israel, we're not asked, we're told that we're terrorists, colonizers, apologists for an apartheid regime. You've felt it this week, perhaps.

And as painful—and personal-- as that is, I'm even more brokenhearted when I hear our politicians, rabbis, communal leaders do the same toward the Palestinian people, like those who wrote to me this week to warn me of the danger of my liberalism: "When will you understand," they wrote. "The Palestinians want to kill us all!" And I was left to wonder: who wants to kill us all? The Palestinian friend who just moments earlier reached out to check in on my brother and his kids in Ra'anana?

And of course, the danger here is not only the rhetoric, but rhetoric backed by state policy.

I'm talking about the dehumanization that comes with referring, constantly, to the other as a demographic threat, and not infrequently as an existential threat.

It is the embrace of Kahanist ideology which, for years, was marginal and now, over the past two years, has moved to the mainstream in Israel much the same way that violent extremist ideologies have moved to the mainstream here in the US.

It is the passage of laws that show a total disregard for the Palestinian human suffering behind the strategic objective.

It is the overt and tacit acceptance of an untenable status quo in Gaza, where nearly two million Palestinians are packed into living conditions none of us would abide—with power only 8 hours a day and running water every other.

It's so hard to talk about all of this. But over the past several years in America, we have reaffirmed again and again:

There comes a time when the only way forward is through the truth. When we're called to speak not only about where it hurts, but also about the underlying conditions that rendered the body susceptible to illness in the first place. Ignoring root causes leaves us vulnerable to endless recurrences of sickness and suffering.

When is the right time to talk about root causes?

My brother came to spend shabbat in LA last week—we hadn't seen him for a year and a half. He flew back to Israel on Monday, just hours before Ben Gurion airport was closed because of the Hamas rockets aiming at central Israel. He actually noticed the plane re-routing as he was landing, and only learned when they touched down why.

He, his wife and their four children have spent several nights in their little bomb shelter this week. The big kids are sometimes able to adjust. The baby is agitated by the sounds of explosions.

I have not spent the week in a bomb shelter, like they and millions of Israelis have. I have been here, like most of you—watching disaster unfold on streets and in shuks and across

neighborhoods that I know and love, praying to God that this will end before more people die. Like many of you, I have held my breath with every red alert on my phone, praying for my beloved family.

My interest, first and foremost right now, is for the violence to stop, the rockets, the beatings, the fires, so that no more people—Israeli or Palestinian—need to bury their loved ones this coming week. No more lives wasted on another war that no one will win.

But as fervent as my prayer that the fighting subsides, we must consider what it means to live in a society in which day after day, year after year, dehumanization has become more the norm than the exception. In which we are trained, almost from birth, to hold our own narratives as sacrosanct and singular, such that we literally cannot hear one another's stories.

It took me time to learn to hear Palestinians speak. I wanted to jump in, to challenge, to counterpoint every point I heard. I had to actively learn to listen.

Years ago, when I first moved to Los Angeles, I went to hear a Palestinian professor speak in a synagogue in Santa Monica. Standing before a crowd of 200 Jews, he began his talk:

"You will not like what you are about to hear. Some of what I'm going to say to you will make you sad, some of it angry. Some will make your blood boil and will make you want to jump out of your seat and rush the stage to silence me. I'm asking you just to listen. Today I am going to tell you what happened in 1948 from the perspective of *my* people. Whether you like it or not, whether it accords with your understanding of history, this is *our* story. And then I will hear yours. Because if we ever are to have peace, we each need to hear where the other is coming from."

That was a revelation for me. We don't need to cede to one another's claims of the past, but we do need to hear them.

Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel's Independence Day, is a day I celebrate with immense gratitude. It was the day that marked our people's transformation from victims of history to agents of history. A day that honored the struggle and suffering of my Jewish family, the generations of trauma and displacement, genocide and expulsion, as we transitioned into a people with a dream made manifest. I hold that day as a miracle.

Today, May 15th, is Nakba day. It falls every year on the day of that first Yom HaAtzmaut, back in 1948.

Palestinians mark on this day not liberation and redemption, but catastrophe. They mark the displacement of 750,000 Palestinians from their homes, as they were expelled or fled from their towns and villages as the State of Israel was established. Nakba is not a historical commemoration. For many Palestinians, it is very much a part of their present, as they still experience the reverberations from an expulsion that they describe as present and continuous.

Many of those who fled remain refugees today, carrying the keys to their grandparents' homes in places like west Jerusalem and Haifa—powerful symbols of loss and a daily reminder of the displacement.

I know talking about this makes some uncomfortable, because this day has been turned by some Palestinian activists into a day of rage and resistance against the occupation, leading sometimes to violent clashes with Israeli police and soldiers. But the fact is that today, right here, right now, I can speak of the Nakba. This is not a sermon that I could give if we were in Jerusalem this shabbat. Because the Nakba Law punishes any municipality that commemorates the events of 1948 as the Nakba. Those who do not comply are libel to lose all state funding.

We're so afraid. A society driven by fear.

My friends on the ground are saying that this is different from previous rounds of violence. The Hamas rockets and Israeli air strikes—horrible as they are—we know this script.

It's the violence in the streets of Israel's mixed cities—Lod, Akko, Bat Yam--violence between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel, neighbors, that's the most painful and surprising. One resident of Lod, where members of our own IKAR team are from, said that the men in the chanting in the street and trying to burn his apartment as he huddled close with his kids… these are men he knew from the neighborhood. They know each other's names.

But they have forgotten each other's humanity.

We have been taught that to see each other, to allow their narrative to hold truth alongside our truth, would be a vulnerability. It would cede moral high ground.

But a society collapses when we are unable to make room for each other. We built an entire rabbinic literature on honoring and preserving the dissenting view. And yet we hold the narrative of our neighbors, our cousins, as if it poses a mortal threat to our family. As if ignoring it might make it disappear.

Our hearts are so heavy. We've suffered losses and we're holding so much fear and anguish for our family and loved ones.

But this week, for all its anguish and heartache, has reminded us the urgency of liberating ourselves from the rigid binaries of the thinking around Israel Palestine that we recognize in others, but so rarely in ourselves. We *have to* see the humanity in one another, or else resign ourselves to the today's violence playing out again and again over the coming years.

A census is taken at the beginning of the book of Bamidbar, which we begin today. Listen to what R' Jonathan Sacks says about the census:

Normally, censuses are dehumanizing. They are taken as a measure of the nation's strength, which exists in and through numbers. The more numerous a nation, the more powerful it is. But that is to reduce the mass of mankind to a mere statistic. I am here, but if I were not, someone else could substitute for me. The most dehumanizing act the Nazis did to inmates of the concentration camps was to rob them of their names and instead give them a number. To be a mere number is no longer to be human. Where the ultimate reality is power, what matters is the totality, not the individual. **Judaism is a sustained protest against this idea. Hence the famous statement in the *Mishnah*, that a single life is like a universe.**

The Torah uses a strange locution when speaking about counting the Israelites. Hebrew has many verbs that mean 'to count' - *limnot, lispor, lachshov, lifkod* - but here it uses the phrase ***se'u et rosh*, literally, 'lift the head.'** We now understand why. **The purpose of a biblical census was not to quantify but to affirm the worth of each individual in the totality of Torah and a society constructed around the idea of the holy.** Normally a census turns us into a mere number. The biblical census - G-d's count, as it were - turns us into a letter in the scroll, significant in its own right, so that if one is missing the whole is invalid. **That is why the word 'Numbers' is precisely wrong as the title of a biblical book. In** the wilderness, where there is no empire or economy to sustain, we become beings in our own right, not troops or a work force, man-in-the-mass. **We are no longer a number but a person in the image of G-d.**

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Today, on this shabbat of fear and vulnerability, I pray for our people. For our *savtas* and *dodas*, for our brothers and for their children. For every Jew who made Aliyah whether as a refugee or a dreamer or both.

And I pray for their neighbors. For the Palestinian people who have yet to have their own dreams realized in the form of a state that will honor their dignity and lift up their humanity, as our self-determination has for us. I close with the words of Amos Oz, who pleaded with us not to give up on the search for one another's humanity:

> I am not preaching a complete moral relativism, certainly not. I am trying to enhance our ability to imagine each other on every level. On the most every day level, to just imagine each other. Imagine each other when we quarrel. Imagine each other when we complain. Imagine each other precisely at the moment we feel that we are 100% right. Even when you are 100% right and the other is 100% wrong, it's still useful.

Even when you're wrong, you're human. I'm asking us to move out of our camps, to stop shouting and waving banners long enough to stand on the side of humanity now. To amplify the voices of Israelis and Palestinians who are begging us to see them, as visibly fellow creatures, just trying to hold up our trousers.