

## Confronting the Tenth Plague

### *Shabbat Bo 5784*

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A rabbinic colleague recently told me that not everyone who has been calling for a ceasefire since the afternoon of October 7 is anti-Israel. Yes, most people making that demand while Hamas terrorists were still slaughtering and kidnapping Israelis either denied, minimized, or articulated justifications for the brutal terror attack. My colleague, though, knows and loves our people in Israel. Jewish peoplehood is central to his rabbinical service, and he feels bound to Jews everywhere. Still, he wrote to me, “I started using the terminology of ceasefire almost immediately because I knew precisely what Israel was going to do (as, of course they’ve done lesser versions of this before for lesser attacks by Hamas).”<sup>i</sup>

My colleague, a younger rabbi, is not alone. In December, more than 1100 young Jewish adults signed petitions to Union for Reform Judaism, demanding that our Movement call for an immediate ceasefire. One of those appeals cries: “We are alarmed that the leadership of our community has not demanded an end to Israel’s devastating violence towards Palestinians, in addition to the safe and immediate return of hostages taken on October 7<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>ii</sup>

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs claims: “Since 7 October, nearly 1.9 million people—about 85 per cent of Gaza’s population—have been displaced across the Strip. The vast majority of the 24,000 killed and 59,000 injured are women and children. Nowhere and no one in Gaza is safe.”<sup>iii</sup> Those figures were provided by Palestinian authorities, presumably meaning the Gaza Health Ministry—that is, Hamas. We need not grant legitimacy to Hamas or the United Nations, to acknowledge that Palestinians in Gaza are dying and suffering in great numbers. We also need not join terrorist groups, nations, and international bodies that seek Israel’s destruction, who insist that the Jewish State is to blame for the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Historical precedent for civilian casualties in warfare is abundant. Writing of the February 1945 firebombing of Dresden, the National World War II Museum estimates “35,000 killed during the 37 hours of terror.”<sup>iv</sup> Alex Wellerstein, an historian of science and nuclear weapons, undertook to estimate deaths from the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but was unable to do better than suggest averaging the “low” estimate of 110,000 killed and the “high” estimate of 210,000, both of which he deems “credible.”<sup>v</sup> Both cases are analogous to Gaza today. Many of the people killed and wounded in Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki were civilians—including, of course, women and children.

We also have a compelling biblical analogy, and it happens to be in this week's portion, *Parashat Bo*, and is well known to anyone who has ever attended a Passover Seder. After nine devastating plagues, Pharaoh, his heart hardened, stubbornly refuses to free the enslaved Children of Israel. Killing the first-born son of every single Egyptian, God does not claim that each of those slain boys and men is responsible for the persecution of the Israelites. Instead, God deems the plague necessary to redeem our ancestors from cruel bondage.

Israel has clearly articulated two goals for the war: to free the hostages and to eliminate Hamas's capability to harm Israelis. Those goals are not only worthy but are the moral imperative of the State, even as they would be of any nation subjected to an attack such as the one that Israel suffered on October 7. Whether the Israeli war effort will or even can achieve these goals is another question—a worthy one, but one better suited for a military expert than a rabbi.

Rabbi Amelia Wolf, though, convinced me that tenth plague does offer an opportunity for us to think about the risks and limits of military action. She notes the curious method God employs for saving Israelite first-born sons—that they must slaughter a lamb, brushing its blood on their doorposts and lintels, so the Angel of Death will be able to distinguish Israelite homes from those of their Egyptian neighbors.

She writes: “Maybe you wonder, as many commentators...have, why such a sign is necessary. Why does the All-Knowing God who has come to redeem you and your people from slavery, who will carry you to freedom on eagles' wings, require a bloody reminder not to kill you on the very eve of rescue? Shouldn't God... recognize you? Shouldn't God know your address, shouldn't your very presence inside your own home be enough protection from the Destroyer?”<sup>vi</sup>

Rabbi Wolf answers by citing a midrash: “Once the Angel of Death has been let loose to strike down, it does not (or perhaps cannot) distinguish between righteous and wicked.”<sup>vii</sup> Rabbi Wolf goes on to argue that violence has been unleashed in Israel and in the Palestinian territories. It is therefore bound to strike down the civilian together with the combatant, the innocent child together with the Israeli soldier, the Israeli peace activist, and the Hamas terrorist.<sup>viii</sup>

Wolf's diagnosis is indisputable. Just as the Nazis rained death and suffering down on Europe and the world, particularly but not only on its Jews, so did they beget the violence that would kill tens of thousands when the Allies firebombed Dresden. When the Empire of Japan slaughtered innocents alongside combatants across Asia and the Pacific, it bore responsibility for the massive losses of its own people at war's end. In one way, Hamas is even more perverse. Its leaders

doubtless knew that their October 7 terrorist attack would provoke a deadly Israeli assault, the one my rabbinic colleague knew would be coming, just as you and I did. Worse, Hamas likely **wanted** Israel to kill thousands upon thousands of Gaza civilians, winning the world’s sympathy to their cause.

Rabbi Wolf offers not only a diagnosis but also a rabbinic prescription: She insists that “when we know the [Angel of Death] has been given permission to strike down, we must do everything in our power to brush the *mezuzot*, the doorposts, of the world with blood—not the spilled blood of our enemies, but the protective blood of sacrifice.”<sup>ix</sup>

Alas, Rabbi Wolf does not tell us what sacrifice would fit the bill; and here, her analogy between the tenth plague and the current war fails. The slaying of the firstborn is the act that spurs Pharaoh to free the Israelites, not the sacrifice of lambs and blood on the doorposts and lintels. Her aspiration is noble, but nobody has yet proposed a plan by which ceasefire would lead to hostage release and security for Israelis to return safely to their homes on the Gaza border.

In this unredeemed world, though, the Angel of Death continues to run as rampant as a Hamas terrorist on October 7, striking down Israeli soldiers, Hamas terrorists, Gaza civilians, and Israeli hostages each day that this war continues. At our Seder tables, we diminish our cups of joy that by ten drops for the plagues upon Egypt. Today, our cups would be empty—drained by the deaths of Palestinian noncombatants, perhaps, except that they were never filled by the salvation of hostages and the protection of Israeli civilians.

And so, we are left to pray, as our people always have, for a messianic redemption, for the day when “no people shall take up the sword against another, nor shall they study war anymore.”<sup>x</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Private message from a rabbinic colleague whom I won’t name. January 11, 2024.

<sup>ii</sup> “Letter from the descendants of progressive rabbis and leaders to express our horror at the URJ’s failure to call for a ceasefire in Gaza,” December 16, 2023, <https://urjceasefirenow.wordpress.com/2023/12/16/to-the-union-for-reform-judaism-on-the-occasion-of-the-organizations-150th-anniversary-celebration/>.

<sup>iii</sup> “Gaza: Children under attack,” <https://www.unocha.org/news/gaza-children-under-attack#:~:text=Entire%20families%20are%20being%20killed,rate%20is%2040%20per%20cent.%22>.

<sup>iv</sup> “Apocalypse in Dresden, February 1945,” The National World War II Museum, February 13, 2020, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/apocalypse-dresden-february-1945>.

<sup>v</sup> Alex Wellerstein, “Counting the Dead at Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 4, 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/08/counting-the-dead-at-hiroshima-and-nagasaki/>.

<sup>vi</sup> Rabbi Amelia Wolf, “What the 10<sup>th</sup> Plague and Missiles Have in Common,” D’var Torah for Bo, (*M*)oral Torah from *T’ruah*, January 17, 2024, [https://truah.org/resources/amelia-wolf-bo-moraltorah\\_2024/](https://truah.org/resources/amelia-wolf-bo-moraltorah_2024/).

<sup>vii</sup> Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael, Pischa 11:15. Translation Wolf’s.

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viii Wolf.

ix Wolf.

x Isaiah 2:4.