

## Catastrophe and Creativity, Persistence and Patience

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Today is October 361<sup>st</sup>. That's what Israelis say, as they continue to suffer the Hamas massacre of October 7<sup>th</sup>, the many and varied perils of the ongoing war, the horrific plight of innocent Israelis held in the cruelest captivity across a full year, and the displacement of over a hundred thousand Israelis who cannot go home, neither to uninhabitable communities destroyed by Hamas nor northern cities and towns bombarded by Hezbollah.

Jewish life in America, too, has become increasingly uncomfortable. Jewish institutions are upended by threats of violence. We are troubled by antisemitism that crosses the line from criticism of Israel's actions. Increasingly, we feel unwelcome with people or in environments we once called home, if "only" because we're expected to address questions we don't feel sufficiently informed to answer. Our reality has changed, and not for the better. Expectations that Jewish people should react a certain way come at us from right, left, and center. Some families that survived the political polarization of the last decade are now divided by diverging responses to Israel and Zionism.

My teacher, Yehuda Kurtzer, says that we have experienced the destruction of our expectation that Jews are ultimately safe, now that we have a Jewish state. We would have been naïve to believe that the Jewish people could be secure forever. Still, after centuries of persecution in both Christian and Muslim lands, we now enjoy two places in the world that Jews truly call home, Israel and North America; and that made us feel safe. We assumed that the existence of Israel fundamentally changed Jewish history, that that Israeli intelligence was infallible and its army impenetrable. And we dared to hope that the arc of history was bending toward peace, justice, and security for the global Jewish family, and maybe for Palestinians, too.<sup>i</sup>

A decade ago, Rabbi Benay Lappe outlined three, and only three, choices, when the stories we have told ourselves prove to be untenable.<sup>ii</sup> The first is denial. With magical thinking, we could pretend that October 7 and its aftermath are merely an aberration, with stability soon to return. Second, we could abandon Israel, as a small but overstated minority of Jewish people have done by declaring themselves anti-Zionist, forsaking our people in Israel by opposing the very notion that of a Jewish State on our ancient, holy land. The final choice, and the only one defensible at this challenging time, is to build a new story on ancient foundations.

Our people's current calamity is not the first in Jewish history, nor is it likely to be the last. We may draw hope from our people's creative responses to catastrophe in ages past as we begin to craft a meaningful future.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein notes that none of Judaism's foundational texts was written at times of our people's freedom, sovereignty, and prosperity. Instead, scholars tell us that the bulk of the Torah was written in response to the destruction of the first Jerusalem Temple in 586, B.C.E. The Talmud, creating Judaism as we know it, came into being after the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in 70 C.E., bringing sacrificial worship to an end. The Zohar, the foundational text of Jewish mysticism, was written by rabbis who faced the end of the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, and codes of Jewish law that remain authoritative were composed by refugees expelled by the Inquisition. European antisemitism, culminating in Holocaust, the most profound destruction in our history, led to what Feinstein calls redemption even greater than salvation from Egyptian bondage, the establishment of the State of Israel<sup>iii</sup>--and, I would add, the eventual end of barriers to Jewish integration in American life.

We often sing, על שלושה דברים, "The world is sustained by three things: By Torah, by worship, and by acts of lovingkindness"<sup>iv</sup> Those words are so familiar that we don't consider how revolutionary they were in their day. Rabbi Feinstein, though, points out that they were spoken to a people whose world until recently had been sustained by Temple sacrifice—or so they thought, until the Temple's destruction put an end to that.<sup>v</sup> The very idea that Judaism is based on the study and observance of Torah was groundbreaking, invented by rabbis who built anew in the wake of the catastrophic loss of their sacred Temple.

Elhanan Nir is an Orthodox rabbi who teaches in a yeshiva in the Occupied West Bank, not exactly the biography one expects of a revolutionary who suggests that Judaism needs to be rebuilt as we struggle to move beyond the current catastrophe. Nevertheless, in December, he published this poem, which I offer in translation:

Now, like air to breathe,  
We need a new Torah.  
Now, gasping for air and with choking throats,  
We need a new [Talmud],  
A new [mysticism and meditation].  
And inside all the brokenness and ... desolation, now,  
A new Hasidism and a new Zionism,  
...  
And new art and new poetry,

And new literature and new cinema,  
And new-old words  
And new-ancient souls from the storehouse,  
And new love out of the terrible weeping.  
For we have all been flooded by the rivers of Re'im and Be'eri,  
And we have ... no mountain ..., nor other tablets,  
And we have no Moses, and we have no strength,  
And now everything  
Is in our hands.<sup>vi</sup>

The “new Torah” will neither look like those in the Ark nor replace them. Instead, our Jewish future will be grounded in Torah but not hamstrung by what its words might have meant originally or as they have been interpreted over time. It will be a Torah of radical equality, celebrating the varied origin stories, ethnicities, family configurations, and religious practices of our diverse people. It will equally value Jewish life in Israel and America, even as it supports our people worldwide. And it will insist that a true reading of our tradition requires a role in realizing **other** people’s dreams, including self-determination for Palestinians.

And it will take some time.

When I counsel patients who are in rehab after an illness or injury, I urge them to embrace “the two p’s,” persistence and patience. Healing requires consistent, and often painful, work, hoping that the stringent effort will yield results. Simultaneously, one needs patience to accept that healing is a process, that there is no quick fix. You must work as if you’ll be good as new tomorrow—and then, tomorrow, when you’re not all better, get up and start all over again.

A half century after the First Temple’s destruction, exiles returned from Babylon—among them Ezra and Nehemiah. The biblical books that bear these two men’s names communicate their impatience with their people’s rejuvenation. The Second Temple wasn’t built in a day, and it did not reach its glory for centuries. Generations of Talmudic sages died without knowing that the Judaism they created would survive, let alone thrive. Sometimes, we must work tirelessly toward a worthy goal, even if it will not be achieved in our own lifetimes, just as we must renew ourselves at the High Holy Days, even though we know we will need to return to repentance repeatedly.

Centuries ago, our rabbinic sages composed a prayer, *ahavat olam*, meaning “everlasting love.” It proclaims that God showers that unmatched love on the Jewish people by giving us Torah, penned primarily in the aftermath of the first destruction, with laws and precepts ordained by the sages after the second. Torah,

ever evolving and regenerating, guides and sustains us. Now, let us seize the privilege to participate in the next reinvention of Torah and the Jewish people, faithful to all that have come before. Then, once again, may the Jewish people be blessed, together with all who join us in blessing.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Yehuda Kurtzer, “Crashing: Jewish Peoplehood After October 7,” Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 9, 2024.

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Benay Lappe, “An Unrecognizable Jewish Future: A Queer Talmudic Take, *ELI Talks*, May 29, 2014. Rabbi Lappe articulated three options for responding to destroyed conceptions, which I have applied to the current situation in the balance of this paragraph.

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbi Ed Feinstein, High Holy Day Sermon Seminar, Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, July 15, 2024.

<sup>iv</sup> Mishnah Avot 1:2.

<sup>v</sup> Feinstein.

<sup>vi</sup> Elhanan Nir, “Poems for a World Built, Destroyed, and Rebuilt, *Lehrhaus*, February 1, 2024, <https://thelehrhaus.com/culture/poems-for-a-world-built-destroyed-and-rebuilt/>. Poem translated from Hebrew by Heather Silverman, Michael Bohnen, Rachel Korazim, and Emunah Eilon.