

When the Terrorists are Jewish ***Shabbat Tol'dot 5786***

November 21, 2025

Daniel Block

Every year, Palestinians in the West Bank descend upon centuries-old olive groves for the annual harvest. The harvest not only sustains economic activity and food security, but renews a living bond with the land and with the ancestors who tended those trees for generations. As Palestinian-American poet Lisa Suhair Majaj describes it, “I bring my son to help, reminding him how generations return again and again to the task of gathering, how the trees endure through time and drought and despair, roots seizing the earth, how branches grafted onto a trunk bear new fruit year after year.”

Over the past two decades, however, this moment of connection has become a flashpoint of fear, interruption, and vulnerability, as annual spikes in settler terrorism threaten both the harvest and the communities who depend on it. The cruel irony is lost on no one: settlers make a point to harass Palestinian farmers as they gather the very olives that for centuries have symbolized peace. Olives which, in our own tradition, evoke the covenant between Noah and God and the Divine promise of peace and renewal after the flood.

Since October 7th, Jewish terrorism and the expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank have only intensified. Religious Zionist extremists have exploited the trauma of that day—and the global community’s focus on the hostages and the devastating loss of life in Gaza—to justify their violence and act with impunity.

Earlier this month, rabbis from across movements and the globe joined Rabbis for Human Rights in a solidarity trip to the West Bank, working to provide a measure of protection between Palestinian farmers and Jewish settlers. One day out in the groves, a settler began flying a drone over the volunteers and the families working below. The drone swooped lower and lower until its blades sliced the arm of Israeli Rabbi Dana Sharon. After the drone fell from the impact, two men in IDF uniforms rushed down, firing live ammunition into the air and pointing their weapons at the volunteers. As Knesset Member and Reform Rabbi Gilad Kariv observed, settler violence has moved far beyond the defense establishment merely “shutting its eyes.” A not-insignificant portion of Jewish nationalist violence in the territories, he

warned, “is being committed in IDF uniform, with IDF weapons, and by taking advantage of the position and strength of the military.”

The moral corruption of Jewish terrorism, the way it pollutes the land with blood and obstructs pathways to peace, would be enough to oppose their actions. But because these terrorists self-identify as Religious Zionists, as people whose actions are justified by Torah and a belief that God has promised the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordanian River to Jews and Jews alone, we need to dissect whether their beliefs actually align with the religion in whose name they proclaim to be acting.

In this week’s parsha, Rebekah begins experiencing a turbulent pregnancy as her children quarrel in her womb. Worried, she asks God why this is happening. God answered her, saying that “two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.” For some, this, along with Jacob’s eventual victory over his brother and his becoming Israel have been read as divine license to dominate those whom we see as enemies. Even when those who share the same womb, the same land, and the same origins as we do.

On its face, that is surely a plausible reading. The Torah is not inherently opposed to Jewish supremacy, and at times even encourages it. But when we read those lines in the context of this week’s haftarah, we get a more nuanced conclusion. We get a conclusion that affirms particularism, and maybe even supremacy, at least in the sense that Jews are in a superior relationship with the Divine, without permitting injustice. We also get a conclusion that teaches us how to behave when the people Israel, like Jacob who began as young, small, and weak, gains the power to dominate others.

In Malachi 2, God speaks through the prophet to warn the corrupt priests that unless they obey God’s word, God will turn their blessings into curses. Specifically, God accuses the priests of distorting Divine law by issuing improper sacrifices and rulings and for forgetting that God made all people with one life-breath.

Malachi’s warning reframes what might otherwise look like divine permission for domination. Even if Jacob is fated to surpass Esau, and even if Israel comes to stand in a singular covenantal bond with God, Malachi insists that power is never self-justifying. “Have we not all one Creator? Has not one God created us all?” the prophet admonishes. If all humanity shares one breath, if every life is animated by the same Divine spark, then any use of

power that humiliates, dispossesses, or brutalizes others is, by definition, a violation of God's law.

The haftarah teaches that our covenant is not a free pass to harm others; it is a binding responsibility to use our blessings justly. When Jews use Torah to rationalize terror, when they wield state power or military privilege to intimidate or dispossess those with whom we share land and history, they betray both Jacob and Israel. The text reminds us that power without justice becomes idolatry. And it warns us that if we forget the humanity of others, God will turn even our most cherished blessings, even the State of Israel, into curses.

But to act justly is not merely to refrain from endorsing injustice, it is to work actively to solve the problem. As American Jews, we have unique power to mobilize and urge our elected officials in D.C. to use every lever of power available to prevent further settler violence. That is why the Union for Reform Judaism has endorsed Representative Jerry Nadler and Senator Cory Booker's West Bank Violence Prevention Act, which would sanction individuals and entities that support Jewish terrorism in the West Bank. This is crucial because settler activities are often sponsored by complex and global networks of funding that must be blocked. According to Haaretz, American charities provide millions of dollars of funding to settler activities each year. If these funds in any way support, facilitate, enable, or otherwise offset the cost of violence, it must be stopped.

I know the realpolitik can sometimes seem grim or predetermined coming from Arkansas, but I promise you, if every person in this room pulls out their bulletin with the QR code, scans it, and sends an email to our representatives in DC, it would be a meaningful first step to leveraging our voice for justice in Israel. The meaningful second step would be the fact that Bonnie Nikol has promised me that she is personally going to give certain elected officials an earful when she comes to D.C. next month for the URJ's consultation on conscience. And I don't know about y'all but I am scared on their behalf.

And yet even as we act, even as we push our government and our community to confront the violence carried out in our name, we cannot lose sight of what all this struggle is ultimately for: peace, security, and sovereignty for Israelis and Palestinians alike. We must continue dreaming and fighting for our vision of peace, one that is as earthy and intimate as

olives gathered by hand and as precious as the breath that Malachi reminds us animates every human life.

I want to close with the final lines of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's famous and controversial poem "A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies":

The soldier said goodbye and went looking for white lilies,
a dove welcoming the dawn on an olive branch.
He understands things only as he senses and smells them.
Homeland for him, he said, is to drink my mother's coffee, to return
safely, at nightfall.

May we all act so that we too can welcome the dawn of an olive branch,
whether here in Arkansas or in the olive groves of the West Bank.

Shabbat shalom.