**The Need to Win the War Without Losing Our Soul**

Rabbi David Glanzberg-Krainin Rosh Hashanah 5786

As we gather on this Rosh Hashanah, this Day of Judgment, we find ourselves in a moment that tests the very core of who we are as a people. For almost two years now, Israel has been engaged in a war that began with the unspeakable horrors of October 7th—a day when the fundamental sense of security of the Jewish state was shattered. As we stand before the Divine throne of judgment, we must ask ourselves not only how we will be judged, but how we judge ourselves in this time of moral complexity.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the State of Israel—and all who stand by her and support her is this: How does Israel win a war that it did not choose while maintaining the moral compass that has guided the Jewish people for millennia? How can Israel—and all of us who love and support the State of Israel—affirm its right to defend itself with necessary force while **not** losing its soul in the process?

Jewish tradition teaches us that life is rarely about choosing between good and evil—those choices are comparatively easy. The real test of one’s character comes when one must choose between competing goods, or as the case in this current reality, between the **lesser** **of bad options**.

The Israeli philosopher Dr. Micah Goodman argues that there is an illusion, particularly characteristic of the West, which argues that the world is **binary**. In this vision, any dilemma always involves a choice between the good and the bad. All you need is the moral courage to choose the **good path** and simply reject the **bad path**.

But Goodman argues that **binary choices** often do not exist in the most intractable of conflicts. Instead of binary choices, there are often **tragic dilemmas**. In a tragic dilemma, the questions are different: What do you do when there are **only** bad choices? Moreover, what happens not only when there are **only bad choices**, but you are judged **as if** there is a **good option**? And what happens when the world looks at the conflict between Hamas and Israel and assumes that Israel is faced with a **binary dilemma**, when in fact it is faced with a **tragic dilemma**? Goodman argues that the end result is that Israel gets radically misunderstood. Because it is usually glossed over that Hamas deliberately designed the tragedy by building **not** an army that protects its civilians, but rather, an **army** *that is protected by its civilians*.

Israel’s **tragic dilemma** forces it to confront two terrible choices. Either it dismantles Hamas, which means causing severe suffering, death and destruction to civilians—which Hamas has deliberately put in harm’s way. And that is an objectively horrible choice. Or, Hamas gets to hold on. Its leaders have publicly stated—even within the last six weeks—that their goal will be to re-build, and to strive—God forbid—to commit more October 7th-like operations in the future.

That, too, is a horrific and unacceptable option. Goodman’s thesis is that Israel has only *these two bad options*, meaning that it has been forced to choose **bad over bad**; but it is judged as if it is choosing **bad over good**. Most of the world does not seem to grasp—or does not seem to care—that when it comes to the fight in Gaza, Israel is left with only bad choices.

And yet, the fact that Israel faces a tragic dilemma does not mean that it can prosecute the war in Gaza without concern for the toll that the war is taking on civilians there. And here, let me invoke some of the rich texts from our Jewish tradition for guidance about how to make this calculus.

The Talmud in Tractate *Beitzah* (32b) teaches us that one of the fundamental characteristics of our people is **compassion**: “Anyone who is compassionate can be certain that they are descendants of our father Abraham.” Yet our tradition also warns us in *Midrash Tanhuma* that “one who is compassionate to the cruel will end up being cruel to the compassionate.”

Taken together, these two teachings create profound tension. We are commanded to be compassionate, yet we must also protect the innocent from those who would destroy them. How do we maintain our compassion, while confronting an enemy that deliberately uses our own moral commitments against us?

There is a powerful midrash about why our patriarch Isaac became blind, found in *Bereisheet Rabbah*. The midrash tells us that when Abraham was binding Isaac on Mount Moriah, the angels were crying, and their tears fell into Isaac's eyes. As a result of those tears—tears shed because of Abraham's inability to see his son as anything other than a sacrifice in that moment—Isaac later lost his ability to see.

This midrash offers us a profound insight: when you are not *seen*, you become less capable of *seeing*. Abraham's momentary inability to see Isaac as his beloved son produced a son who would struggle with vision throughout his life.

When we are not seen—when our pain, our own trauma, our own legitimate security concerns are dismissed—we risk losing our own capacity to see the Other. When the world fails to comprehend the depth of the October 7th trauma, when it dismisses as trivial that Hamas still holds hostages in captivity and has done so for nearly two years, when it rushes to judge Israel’s response without understanding the impossible dilemmas it faces, it becomes harder for those of us who support Israel to avoid becoming jaded and cynical by the one-sided condemnation Israel faces from so much of the world.

Yet the midrash also teaches us that this cycle must be broken. We too must find ways to see clearly, even when we feel unseen by much of the world.

The central mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah is hearing the shofar whose purpose is to wake us up. This year, the shofar call must wake us not only out of our **complacency**, but also out of the **numbness** that can come from this prolonged conflict. It must remind us that even in war—especially in war—we are called to examine our deeds and remember who we are meant to be.

Israel’s goal of eliminating the threat from Hamas is not only **just**, it is also **legitimate** and **morally necessary**. But acknowledging the justice of our cause does not absolve us of the obligation to reckon with its costs. The tens of thousands of Palestinian civilian non-combatants who have been wounded and killed in this war call out for our empathy; the hunger and the danger of starvation in Gaza call out for continued action by the government of Israel; even as we recognize that the suffering of Palestinians has been deliberately orchestrated by Hamas. Frequently, Hamas withholds food from its own citizens to raise money to purchase weapons and to keep the blame focused on Israel.

Yet, we are not weaker when we affirm these two truths simultaneously: Yes, eliminating Hamas’ threat to Israel is just, and yes, the human cost—both on Israelis **and** Palestinians—demands our moral attention and genuine grief. As we learn from Dr. Tal Becker, who defended Israel at the International Court of Justice in 2024 when Israel was accused of genocide by South Africa: “You can believe with [absolute conviction] that you are doing the right and necessary thing, while at the same time acknowledge that there is a real cost to doing that very thing."

Rosh Hashanah is fundamentally about judgment—Divine judgment of humanity, and our own judgment and discernment of ourselves, and of our own actions. Our prayers on this day speak of God both as *Melech*—as the All-powerful King—and as *El Rachum*—as the Source of Compassion. This duality reflects the tension that all of us who advocate for Israel’s interests must maintain: We affirm Israel’s right to exercise necessary power even as we advocate it strive to do so with mercy.

Let me be clear that there is no **moral equivalence** here. There is a fundamental asymmetry between a democratic state defending itself within legal constraints and a terrorist organization that deliberately targets civilians. **But moral asymmetry does not eliminate moral responsibility**.

Perhaps the greatest threat to Israel today is not a **military defeat**—Israel’s enemies have learned they cannot destroy it through conventional warfare. Perhaps the greatest threat is that a prolonged conflict will erode a sense of shared humanity among all who support the need for Israeli citizens to be able to live in their country free from the fear of terrorist threats. That trauma and isolation will cause Israel and her supporters to retreat into a fortress mentality that abandons our aspirations to be a light unto the nations.

I have heard the voices that argue that after two years of war, empathy is a luxury that we cannot afford; that compassion represents naivete or even betrayal. “Rabbi,” I have been asked, “would it have helped us to have empathy for the Nazis during World War II?”

But this represents a fundamental misunderstanding. Empathy does not mean abandoning Israel’s right to live securely or accepting the narrative of Israel’s enemies. It does not mean that Israel should lay down its arms when Hamas still poses a threat to the citizens of Israel. But it does mean recognizing that Palestinian children who die in this war were also created in the image of God, even as we hold Hamas fully responsible for putting them in harm's way. It means grieving for all innocent life lost while maintaining absolute moral clarity about who bears responsibility for this conflict.

As we look toward the New Year, we must resist letting this war define the limits of our aspirations. Throughout our history, the Jewish people have faced seemingly impossible circumstances and found ways not merely to survive, but to transform our situation entirely.

Who could have imagined, in the depths of the Holocaust, that within three years there would be a Jewish state? Who could have predicted that Israel would emerge not only victorious from existential threats but transformed?

Already, we can see potential outlines of a transformed Middle East. Hamas today represents a shell of the threat that it posed on October 6th. Hezbollah has been completely degraded. Iran's axis of terror has suffered unprecedented setbacks. These developments create space for more moderate forces to emerge and for new possibilities of peace to develop.

Because everything is uncertain, everything is also possible. We cannot allow trauma to blind us to the opportunities that may emerge from this darkness.

As we listen to the sounds of the shofar this year, let us affirm that after 2,000 years in Exile, the return of Jewish sovereignty in the state of Israel provides the opportunity to demonstrate that **power** can be used as a means to advance **justice**. At the same time, let the shofar remind us that our **particular** mission as Jews is connected to a **universal** mission to be a light unto the nations.

As we begin this New Year, I want to ask you to consider two concrete actions that will demonstrate your solidarity with the people of Israel. First, I want to ask you to consider joining me on a solidarity mission to Israel in partnership with the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia that will be dedicated to doing service for our brothers and sisters in Isreal and which will allow us to observe *Yom Ha’Zikaron*—Israel’s Memorial Day—and *Yom Ha’Atzmaut*—Israel’s Independence Day. If you have never witnessed the transition from a nation grieving those who have lost their lives defending the State on *Yom Ha’Zikaron*—as it turns the next day into a celebration of Israel’s Independence—it is an incredibly moving juxtaposition.

You can be a strong supporter of the Netanyahu government, or you can have serious reservations about some of the policies of the Netanyahu government. But this is a Mission dedicated to supporting the **people** of Israel who have been at war for almost two years. It will be focused on doing acts of **service.**  At a time when Israelis risk being turned into a pariah nation, it is crucial that the citizens of Israel know that they are supported by the Jewish community of the United States; that is why the Mission is being called “Philly’s Got Israel’s Back.” Thanks to the Lasko Foundation where I serve as a trustee, there will be $2,000 subsidies available to those for whom that subsidy will make the difference between being able to afford to go or not go at all.

Second, Beth Sholom is partnering with the Resilience Center in *Sedot Negev—*an area that is only kilometers from Gaza and one in which many of those living in the region were murdered, attacked, and kidnapped. The Resilience Center provides ongoing mental health resources to meet the rising demand of traumatized Israelis who are attempting to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of October 7th. We ask you to take one of the pamphlets that were made available to you on your way in and to start the New Year off with a donation to provide these vital mental health services.

On Rosh Hashanah, we recite “Today is the birthday of the world”—*Hayom harat olam*. This reminds us that we are all part of a single human family, all created in the divine image. Israel’s victory will not be measured **solely** by its military achievements. It will be measured by its ability to emerge from this conflict with its values intact, with its moral compass functioning, with its capacity for compassion preserved.

We live in the tension between profound moments—between trauma and hope, between the burden of law and the promise of peace, between the necessity of self-defense and the vision of transformation.

May this New Year bring both victory over our enemies and victory over the temptation to become like them. May it bring security for our people and peace for all who truly crave it. May it bring judgment for the wicked and mercy for the innocent. And may we be worthy of the trust that history and the Divine have placed in us.

*L'shanah tovah tikatevu v'tichatemu*—may you be inscribed and sealed for a good year, a year in which we prove that it is possible to win a war without losing our souls. *Kein yi’he ratzon—*So may it be—Amen.