

# HIGH HOLIDAY TEXTS AND SERMON TOPICS on the Israel-Hamas War 2024/5785

## Sermon Topic 1:

**We must reject the binary that Israeli and Palestinian safety and freedom are in conflict with each other. The only future is a shared future. To get there, we must recognize our common humanity and acknowledge that Palestinians and Israelis are both suffering right now.**

*This section provides texts that speak to the importance of holding the pain of Palestinians alongside the grief we feel for Jewish Israelis. These texts reject the zero-sum thinking that one can only care about Israelis or Palestinians.*

### Talmud Bavli Yoma 82b:1

The Gemara asks: And with regard to the murderer themselves, from where do we derive [this halakha that one should be killed rather than transgress the prohibition against murder?] It is derived through reason, as it was told: A certain person came before Rava. They said to Rava: The master of the village [where I live] said to me: Kill so-and-so, and if you do not do so, I will kill you. Rava said to him: Let yourself be killed, and you should not kill. Rava reasoned: What did you see to make you believe that your blood is redder? Perhaps the blood of that person is redder.

וְרוֹצֵחַ גּוֹפִיָּה מִנָּא לֵךְ? סְבָרָא הִיא: דְּהָהוּא דְאַתָּא  
לְקַמֵּיהּ (דְּרַבָּא), אָמַר לֵיהּ, אָמַר לִי מַרִּי דּוֹרְאִי:  
קְטִילֵיהּ לְפָלְגָנָא, וְאִי לָא — קְטִילְנָא לָהּ. אָמַר לֵיהּ:  
נְקֻטְלָהּ וְלֹא תִקְטוּל. מַאי תְּזִית דְּדָמָא דִּידָךְ סוּמָק  
טְפִי? דִּילְמָא דָּמָא דְּהָהוּא גְבָרָא סוּמָק טְפִי!

This well-known text remains relevant as we struggle to respond to the death toll of this brutal war. The text rejects the notion that the life of one person can ever be valued over that of another; even at the risk of one's own life, a person should not kill another person. Rashi's commentary on this text teaches that this is because we should live by the law and not die by it. By valuing the lives of some at the expense of others, we denigrate the holiness of the mitzvah of honoring life. In a moment when we have become accustomed to tremendous death, we need a reminder that every human bleeds red.

## Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 33b:10

Abaye said: In this [matter, the *tanna'im*] certainly disagree. As it is written: "It is a day of sounding t'ruah the *shofar* to you" (Numbers 29:1), and we translate this verse in Aramaic as: It is a day of *yevava* to you. And to define a *yevava*, the Gemara quotes a verse that is written about the mother of Sisera: "Through the window she looked forth and wailed [*vateyabev*], the mother of Sisera" (Judges 5:28). One Sage holds that this means moanings, broken sighs, as in the blasts called *shevarim*. And one Sage holds that it means whimpers, as in the short blasts called *t'ruot*.

אמר אביי: בקהא ודאי פליגי, דכתיב: "יום תרועה יהיה לכם", ומתרגמינן: "יום יבבא יהא לכוך".  
וכתיב באימיה דסיסרא: "בעד החלון נשקפה ותיבב אם סיסרא". מר סבר גנזתי גנח. ומר סבר ילולי יליל.

When we hear the sounds of the shofar, we are reminded to hear the weeping of bereaved mothers. It doesn't matter if that mother is Sarah or the mother of Sisera (one of the great enemies of the Jewish people); all weeping sounds the same. This text can be powerfully paired with many poems and prayers to move people through grief into action. [The Mother's Prayer](#) is one such prayer that reflects the magnitude of grief and pain felt by both Israeli and Palestinian mothers (and all parents and family members). With gratitude to Rabbi Amichai Lau Lavie for the translation.

## Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak) on Genesis 16:6

שפחתך בידך ... ויאמר "your servant is in your hands." That is, even though she has slept with me, she is as she always was, and you have the freedom to tyrannize her by acting inappropriately toward her, for she is your servant, and you have authority over her, and she will not take it from me as she will from you, and behold I am sublimating my dignity on your behalf.

שפחתך בידך, אע"פ ששכבה בחיקי שפחתך היא כבתחלה ויש לך רשות עליה לרדותה אם תעשה אליך דבר שלא כהוגן כי היא שפחתך ורשותה בידך ולא תקבל ממני כמו שתקבל ממך, והנני מוחל לך כבודי.

This story reminds us of the dangers of zero-sum thinking. Sarah lived through the incredible pain of infertility, exacerbated by a patriarchal structure that measured a woman's worth based on her ability to have children. At the same time, her decision to banish Hagar and Ishmael caused tremendous harm and nearly killed two people. Why was it that Sarah, reveling in the happiness of her long-awaited child, couldn't allow Hagar the happiness of Ishmael alongside her? In a moment when there is tremendous dehumanization of "the other" and a sense that one can only be safe, free, and happy if someone else is not, how can the story of Sarah, Hagar, and their families help us move beyond the belief that peace and security for some must come at the expense of others?

**Rabbeinu Bachya on Peace from *Kad Hakemach*  
(Translation from *Encyclopedia of Torah Thoughts* by *Rebbeinu Bachya Ben Asher*, p.624)**

A person needs to beware of discord and stay away from those who hate peace, about whom Isaiah said (Isaiah 59:8), they did not know the way of peace... [for it is known that whole kingdoms and communities have been destroyed] because of controversy. We find in the case of Korach, for example, that the punishment [of the rebels] included *even their wives, and their sons, and their little ones*. (Numbers 16:27) The Sages commented: (Tanchuma, Korach, 8) "...people are called wicked. First, there is the one who lifts his hand to smite his fellow man even though he does not actually strike him, for it is said, *And he [Moses] said to the wicked one, Why wilt thou smite thy Fellow?* (Exodus 2:13) It does not say, 'why did you smite' but '*Why wilt thou smite?*... Third, there is the haughty person, as it says, *a wicked man hardeneth his face*. (Proverbs 21:29)

צריך אדם ליזהר מן המחלוקת ולהתרחק מאותן  
ששונאים השלום שעליהם אמר ישעיה (ישעיהו  
נ"ט:ח) דרך שלום לא ידעו... ובשביל המחלוקת  
אבדו אפ"י יונקי שדים שנאמר (במדבר יז)  
ובניהם ונשיהם וטפם, דרשו רז"ל ארבעה נקראו  
רשעים המרים יד על חברו אע"פ שלא הכהו  
נקרא רשע שנא' (שמות ב':י"ג) ויאמר לרשע  
למה תכה רעך למה הכית לא נאמר אלא למה  
תכה, והלוא ואינו משלם שנאמר (תהילים  
ל"ז:כ"א) לוח רשע ולא ישלם. ומי שיש בו עזות  
פנים שנא' (משלי כ"א:כ"ט) העז איש רשע  
בפניו.

This text warns of the dangers of people who foster dissent and oppose peace, and the risks that such "wicked" people can destroy entire communities, including killing innocent people. In a moment when so many political leaders and media personalities encourage anger and threaten violence, it is critical to call out those inciting violence and instead follow the leaders choosing the path of peace. Many are insisting on a framework of Israelis versus Palestinians. This text teaches us of the importance of creating a new "us" and "them," wherein we are the people committed to justice and peace fighting together against those embodying wickedness and hate.

## Sermon Topic 2:

**Though rising antisemitism may provoke a desire for Jews to wall ourselves off, our response should instead be deeper and stronger relationships with other marginalized groups, in spite of the challenges.**

*We're in a moment when the Jewish community is deeply traumatized and fearful, as antisemitic incidents have risen. The risk is that Jews will respond by walling ourselves off from others, including the communities we need to cooperate with to fight against antisemitism and other forms of oppression and discrimination. Antisemitism is often exploited by white supremacists to divide marginalized groups; by refusing to walk away from relationships with other communities — even those we have strong disagreements with — we strengthen our ability to fight antisemitism along with other bigotries, and to create a country and a world safer for all of us.*

## Sifrei Ki Tetze, Piska 286

“Your brother will be degraded before your eyes.” From the moment he is flogged, he is your brother. Rabbi Chananya ben Gamliel said, “all day, the text calls him ‘wicked,’ as it says ‘if the wicked person is subject to lashes’ (Deuteronomy 25:2). But from the time that he is flogged, the text calls him ‘your brother.’”

משלקה הרי הוא אחיך מיכן אמרו כל חייבי כריתות שלקו נפטרו מיד כריתתם. רבי חנניה בן גמליאל אומר כל היום הכתוב קורא אותו רשע שנאמר והיה אם בן הכות הרשע אבל משלקה הכתוב קורא אותו אחיך שנאמר ונקלה אחיך.

This text serves as a powerful reminder that even someone who has done us wrong — perhaps even through antisemitic speech or action — may deserve reprimand, but remains our sibling. Rather than writing this person off as “wicked,” we should lean into the holy act of relationship-building and be gentle with our rebukes as we would be to a family member.

## Vayikra Rabbah 4:6

Chizkiya taught: “Israel are scattered sheep” (Jeremiah 50:17). Israel is likened to sheep. Just as, if a sheep is struck on its head or one of its limbs all its limbs feel it, so it is with Israel; one of them sins and all of them feel it. “Shall one man sin, [and You will rage against the entire congregation?]” (Numbers 16:22). Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught: This is analogous to people who were sitting in a ship. One of them took a drill and began drilling a hole. His counterparts said to him: ‘What are you sitting and doing?’ He said to them: ‘Why do you care? Am I not drilling under myself?’ They said to him: ‘Because the water will rise and flood the ship we are on!’ So too, Job said: “If indeed I erred, with me my error rests” (Job 19:4). His counterparts said to him: “For he adds transgression to his sin, he extends [*yispok*] among us” (Job 34:37); you extend your iniquities among us.

תני חזקיה: שֶׁהַ פְּזוּרָה יִשְׂרָאֵל, נִמְשָׁלוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְשֶׁה, מֵה שֶׁה הִנָּה לֹקֵה עַל רֹאשׁוֹ אוֹ בְּאֶחָד מֵאַבְרָיו וְכָל אַבְרָיו מְרַגְּשִׁין, כִּד הֵן יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֶחָד מֵהֶן חוֹטֵא וְכָלֵן מְרַגְּשִׁין: הָאִישׁ אֶחָד יַחְטֵא, תְּנִי רַבִּי שְׂמֵעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחָאי, מְשַׁל לְבָנֵי אָדָם שֶׁהֵיוּ יוֹשְׁבֵין בְּסַפִּינָה נִטֵּל אֶחָד מֵהֶן מְקַדֵּחַ וְהִתְחִיל קוֹדֵחַ תַּחְתָּיו, אָמְרוּ לוֹ חֲבֵרָיו מֵה אַתָּה יוֹשֵׁב וְעוֹשֶׂה, אָמַר לָהֶם מָה אֶכְפֵּת לָכֶם לֹא תַחְתִּי אֲנִי קוֹדֵחַ, אָמְרוּ לוֹ שֶׁהַמַּיִם עוֹלִין וּמְצִיפִין עָלֵינוּ אֵת הַסַּפִּינָה. כִּד אָמַר אִיּוֹב: וְאַף אֲמַנָּם שְׂגִיתִי אֶתִּי תָלִין מְשׁוֹגָתִי, אָמְרוּ לוֹ חֲבֵרָיו: כִּי יִסִּיף עַל חַטָּאתוֹ פֶּשַׁע בֵּינֵינוּ יִשְׁפּוֹק, אַתָּה מְסַפֵּיק בֵּינֵינוּ אֵת עֲוֹנוֹתֵיךְ.

This powerful and well-known story speaks to the ways in which all forms of oppression and liberation are connected. When one group is marginalized, we all suffer. When we plug up the holes of bigotry with communication, caring, and the pursuit of equity, the ship is buoyed and everyone benefits. This text reminds us that our fight against antisemitism is and must be connected to our fight against all other forms of oppression.

## Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 2:1

What is complete repentance? One who once more had in it in their power to repeat a violation, but separated themselves from it, and did not do it because of repentance, not out of fear or lack of strength.

אי זו היא תשובה גמורה. זה שקבא לידו דבר  
שעבר בו ואפשר בידו לעשותו ופרש ולא עשה  
מפני התשובה. לא מיראה ולא מכשלון כח.

One of the fundamental teachings of the High Holidays is that people have the capacity for change through teshuva. Instead of writing someone off as antisemitic for something they said, we must bring them into closer conversation. We won't end antisemitism by stepping away from relationships; rather, we must commit to stronger relationships and encourage education and repair.

## Proverbs 29:25

A person's fears become a trap for him,  
But the one who trusts in God shall be exalted  
[safeguarded].

חרדת אדם יתן מוקש ובוטח בה' ישגב.

## Ibn Ezra's Commentary on Proverbs 29:25

Y'shugav (shall be exalted) - God removes the person from the midst/the source of their anxiety. Another interpretation: [When someone is frightened] God gives them a distraction that they can use to distract themselves from the fear (trapping your eyes). Another interpretation: One who is afraid and does not put their trust in God - what they fear will come to pass.

ישוגב - השם ישגבהו מפני המחריד. פרוש אחר:  
שיחרדהו השם ויתן לו המוקש שישים ללכוד  
העניים. פרוש אחר: איש מפחד ולא יתן מבטחו  
בשם - יבואהו מה שיירא.

This text and Ibn Ezra's commentary speak to the dangers of a person or group becoming too caught up in their own fear and trauma. The last line of Ibn Ezra's commentary teaches that when we isolate ourselves because of fear, that fear actually comes to fruition. In practice, if we as Jews become so scared of antisemitism that we don't engage with other communities, they can't show up for us, and we are not at the table to speak up for ourselves as Jews.

## Sermon Topic 3:

**Jewish tradition emphasizes the importance of holding multiple perspectives. This framework can provide a model to help us heal some of the intergenerational and ideological divisions since October 7.**

*Since October 7, we've watched as communities and families have been driven apart by passionate disagreements about the situation in Israel and Palestine. Jewish tradition values debate, yet it is still difficult to be divided in this painful moment. The texts in this section suggest ways to help our families and communities bridge the divide.*

### Martin Buber in *I and Thou*

"One wishes to be confirmed in their being by another human, and wishes to have a presence in the being of the other....Secretly and bashfully they watch for a YES which allows them to be and which can come to them only from one human person to another."

Martin Buber powerfully articulates that there are two types of relationships: I-It and I-Thou. I-It relationships are transactional — for instance, between a homeowner and someone hired to paint their house. This type of relationship is sometimes necessary. However, if that is the only kind of relationship that we have with other human beings, we have lost what is distinctly human in us: the ability to relate to others for the sake of the relationship itself. Buber calls this an "I-Thou" relationship. These types of relationships are deeper and allow people to truly see each other. Affirmation — seeing someone as they are, as their full self — doesn't necessarily mean agreement. In this divisive moment, what would it look like to do the spiritual work of creating I-Thou relationships across difference?

### Rabbi Benay Lappe, CRASH Talk

"And there are three, and only three, possible responses to a crash, ever. And people tend to choose one of these three responses as a result of a number of factors, which we can talk about later. But the three basic responses are what I call . . . Option One, which is denying that a crash has occurred and reverting to your master story and hanging on for dear life—and people tend to build walls around that old master story to make sure that nothing interferes or threatens it again. Option Two would be accepting that your master story has crashed, completely rejecting that master story, and jumping off into a completely new story. Option Three is to accept that the story has crashed, but instead of abandoning the story, you stay in it, reinterpreting it through the lens of the crash, and building a new story from the amalgamation of the original story, the crash material and the reinterpretation."

Rabbi Lappe suggests that the world is built on "master stories," which help us make sense of our lives. However, every story inevitably crashes, as the world changes and people's ideas change with it. Rabbi Lappe notes that there are three ways that people can respond to any given crash. In a moment when so much is "crashing" and the trusted "master stories" that have shaped us are shifting, Rabbi Lappe's framework can explain many of the different responses people are having.

## Emmanuel Levinas on Truth (From "Truth and Sincerity: The Concept of Truth in Levinas' Philosophy" by Shojiro Kotegawa)

"...It is as if the multiplicity of persons ... were the condition for the plentitude of 'absolute Truth'; as if every person, through his uniqueness were the guarantee of the revelation of a unique aspect of truth, and some of its points would never have been revealed if some people had been absent from mankind... the totality of the true is constituted from the combination of multiple people: the uniqueness of each act of listening carrying the secret of the text; the voice of Revelation, as inflected, precisely, by each person's ear, would be necessary to the 'Whole' of the Truth..."

Often there is an assumption of a universal or absolute Truth, but 20th century philosopher Levinas reminds us that every person has their own truths. By listening to one another's perspectives and experiences, we gain "unique aspect[s] of truth" and access another sliver of Revelation.

### Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 12:25

"I, Adonai, am your God" (Exodus 20:2). Channa bar Papa said, God appeared to them as an angry face, an ordinary face, an explaining face, an abrasive face. An angry face for the [Bible] Text, when a person teaches their child the Torah they should learn with awe. A mediocre face for the Mishna. An explaining face for the Talmud. An abrasive face for the legend[ary stories]. God said to them "you see all these likenesses, but I am [still] your God." R' Levi said, to them [the people] God appeared as this icon that has a [different] face from every position, a thousand people gaze at it and it reflects each one of them.

אנכי י"י אלהיך. א"ר חננא בר פפא נראה להם  
הקב"ה פנים זעומות, פנים בינוניות, פנים  
מסבירות, פנים שוחקות. פנים זעומות למקרא,  
כשאדם מלמד את בנו תורה צריך ללמדו באימה.  
פנים בינונית למשנה. פנים מסבירות לתלמוד.  
פנים שוחקות לאגדה. אמ' להם הקב"ה אע"פ  
שאתם רואין כל הדמויות הללו, אלא אנכי י"י  
אלהיך. א"ר לוי נראה להם הקב"ה כאיקונין הזו  
שיש לה פנים מכל מקום, אלף בני אדם מביטין  
בה והיא מבטת בכולם.

In this midrash, the biblical verse is expounded to show the multiplicity of human histories, opinions, and perspectives — and how every human being is still a reflection of God's image. When we speak to someone we have strongly disagreed with over this past year (and beyond), we can try to see the Divine reflected in them.

## Sermon Topic 4:

**Holding onto hope in the midst of despair is a powerful and necessary political and spiritual practice.**

*Hope can feel impossible — and even out of touch — in the face of this war. The spiritual work of hope isn't to ignore reality, but to find a way to wake up every morning and commit to the work for another day. Avodas Yisrael teaches that the God we meet during the High Holidays is deeply in tune with imagination. As we gather on the High Holidays to imagine and describe the world we want to see, we build hope.*

### Likutei Moharan 76:3:1

["Everyone's eyes look to You with hope, and You give them their sustenance in its time" (Psalms 145:15).] This is the benefit of trust. Trust is the aspect of looking: a person looks and watches with his eyes for God alone. And that person trusts in God, as in "Everyone's eyes look to You with hope." Looking with trust also creates a vessel—namely, dimension and time. Bounty is constantly descending from on high, but it is without fixed time. On occasion, the thing one needs now will arrive in only two or three years. However, by looking with trust he gives the bounty dimension and time, so that this bounty comes at the very time one needs it.

וְזֶהוּ בְּחִינַת מַעֲלַת הַבְּטָחוֹן. כִּי הַבְּטָחוֹן הוּא בְּחִינַת  
הַסְתַּכְּלוּת, שְׂמֻסְתַּכְּל וְצוֹפֵה בְּעֵינָיו לְהִשָּׁם יִתְבַּרְךָ  
לְבַד, וּבֹטֵחַ בּוֹ, בְּבְחִינַת (תְּהִלִּים קמ"ה:ט"ו):  
עֵינַי כָּל אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁבְּרוּ. כִּי עַל-יְדֵי הַסְתַּכְּלוּת  
בְּבְטָחוֹן גַּם כֵּן עוֹשֶׂה כְּלִי, דְּהִינּוּ גְבוּל וְזָמַן. כִּי  
הַשְּׁפָעָה יוֹרֶדֶת מִלְּמַעְלָה תָּמִיד, אֲךָ שֶׁהִיא בְּלֹא  
זָמַן. כִּי לְפָעֲמִים דָּבָר שְׂצָרִיךָ לוֹ עַכְשָׁיו, יָבֹא  
בְּשָׂתִים אוֹ שְׁלֹשׁ שָׁנִים. אֲךָ עַל-יְדֵי הַסְתַּכְּלוּת  
בְּבְטָחוֹן, עוֹשֶׂה לְהַשְׁפִּיעַ גְבוּל וְזָמַן, שֶׁתִּבְּאוּ  
הַשְּׁפָעָה בְּעֵת וְזָמַן שֶׁהוּא צָרִיךְ.

This text is Rebbe Nachman's commentary on the psalm, "Everyone's eyes look to You with hope, and You give them their sustenance in its time." He teaches us that having trust in a larger force plays a powerful role in cultivating hope. This trust — in God, in oneness, in the arc of the moral universe, in our movements — can fortify us to take meaningful action for the long haul.



## *Hope in The Dark by Rebecca Solnit*

"Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes – you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and knowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what is may impact, are not things we can know beforehand...Or perhaps studying the record more carefully leads us to expect miracles - not when and where we expect them, but to expect to be astonished, to expect that we don't know. And this is grounds to act..."

This thought-provoking book is specifically geared towards activists and people working on political campaigns, but can be relevant to anyone seeking to pursue justice. Solnit has a gift for inviting us to see glimmers of hope in a bleak reality. She teaches us how to find hope in moments of pain as well as moments of celebration.

## *Choosing Hope: The Heritage of Judaism by Dr. David Arnow*

"When we take an honest look at ourselves, there's almost always a divergence between our conduct and our ideals, a sense of falling short, a failing to be our best selves. Teshuvah involves the struggle to narrow that gap. Becoming aware of that disparity gives rise to a range of reactions- including shame, guilt, and despair, but also hope- hope that with sufficient effort, we can change for the better.

"Because teshuva is so tightly bound to images of divine judgment, mercy, pardon, and so on, I've set this discussion in the theological framework that has worked for me. The essential point is that teshuvah aims to allow the divine image we all possess to exert greater influence on our behavior. How we carry out teshuvah depends on what we are trying to improve..."

"In Jewish thought, God shares our hopes to better reflect God's vision, both individually and collectively. We see this in Rashi's comment on 'Hope deferred sickens the heart, but desire realized is a tree of life' (Proverbs 13:12). In its context, the verse is clearly speaking about the individual, but Rashi reads it as applying also to the people Israel: 'The hope that the Holy One had hope for Israel, the hope that they would repent, ultimately brought Israel to heart sickness when they did not repent. When they fulfilled G-d's desire, that hope was a tree of life to them.' Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way, 'God is in search of man waiting, hoping for man to do God's will.'"

This book by psychologist Dr. David Arnow focuses on Jewish understandings of hope and why hope is important to Jews — something particularly useful in a moment when so many in our communities are feeling hopeless. Arnow teaches that teshuva and the internal work of Elul are some of our greatest tools for accessing personal hope, and he illuminates the role of personal growth in creating a more hopeful world.