

## UNDER PRESSURE

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Reading:

Sahar Vardi, “Dual Loyalty” (Times of Israel, 10/11/23), excerpt:

We on the left are often accused of dual loyalty. And on days like this, I really feel it. Even if loyal isn’t exactly the right word here, as I’ll explain, the sentiment is right.

On a street in the [upscale Jewish] Rehavia neighborhood [in Jerusalem], families get out of two cars. Most of them were already crying, the rest with an indescribable sadness in their eyes, as they knock softly on the door of one of the houses. Family of someone who died? Of someone kidnapped?

You open a video of a sanitation worker who was beaten in the city center because he is Arab and try not to avert your gaze...

“Dual loyalty” is feeling the heartbreak of this and also of that.

It is to hold this moment between the heartbreak and pain and shock over the total destruction [by Palestinian militants in 2021] of [the Jewish kibbutz] Nir Oz and to think about all the people there, and at the same time, to feel the horror over the impending total destruction of [the] Shuja’iyya [neighborhood in Gaza City] and to think about all the people there.

Loyalty may not be the right word. It’s dual pain, dual heartbreak, care, love. It is to hold everyone’s humanity. And it’s hard. It’s so hard to have humanity here...

[I’m trying] to express this feeling of having two worlds that look so contradictory from the outside and feel so much the same from the inside. I think the closest I’ve come to an answer to why I’m writing is because somehow, in a heartbreaking and soul-crushing way, it also feels like the only optimism I can hold onto right now. This pain that some of us in our small community hold, this “dual loyalty,” may be the biggest hope for this place.

Sermon:

I have been heartbroken and devastated by the horrifically savage violence perpetrated by the terrorist group Hamas against the state of Israel and its citizens last Saturday. Nothing justifies the brutal murder of hundreds of innocent men, women, and children. The swift and harsh condemnation of Hamas by many of the world's religious and political leaders has been fully justified. The actions of Hamas have been morally reprehensible in the extreme.

The prohibition against killing innocent civilians not only applies to situations of relative peace; it also applies to the conduct of war. In the days and weeks ahead, the state of Israel will need to guard against allowing its worst enemy to provoke it into committing morally reprehensible actions in return.

I'm profoundly aware of the religious, moral, and political complexities of these matters, which are highly contested and deeply fraught. Perhaps nowhere else in the world have these complexities been so intensively intertwined with religious history and religious fervor. I'm not a politician or a military strategist or a diplomat. I'm a theologian and preacher. My role is to bear witness to the moral challenges of our time as I understand them. I hope my reflections today will be both emotionally helpful and morally useful.

Over the past ten years, I have been to Israel and Palestine perhaps two dozen times. Much of my effort has been spent at Tel Aviv University coordinating an initiative focused on Palestinian students, who often struggle to keep up with their Jewish counterparts. Jewish citizens of Israel serve in the military after high school and thus enter college later than their Palestinian counterparts. The Jewish students have typically attended better schools, have a vastly better command of Hebrew, and have become comfortable in large bureaucratic organizations. Because of these disparities, most Palestinian students struggle from the outset and many eventually drop out.

In addition to spending time at Tel Aviv University, I have also spent considerable time in Nazareth, Haifa, and other Palestinian-majority cities and villages in Israel, as well as considerable time in the West Bank. I have spent time in Hebron, Beita, Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem, and other hotspots where Jewish settlers and the Israeli police have clashed with Palestinian residents. I have seen the Jewish settlements built on Palestinian land — picture a fully functioning and architecturally beautiful city on a hill — and I have seen the tin and tarp Palestinian villages huddled in their shadows. I have been harassed by belligerent and armed Jewish settlers in Hebron, and I have been detained by Israeli border police during the destruction of a Palestinian home in a Bedouin village in the Negev.

I have also visited Gaza. I have seen firsthand the desperate circumstances of life for 2.3 million people who, before the current siege, had access to water three hours a day, electricity four hours a day, only rudimentary medical care, staggeringly high unemployment rates, and no hope that things will improve in the future.

Over the years, I have participated in numerous meetings at the Council on Foreign Relations on these matters, and I have spoken with countless experts who specialize in the religious, political, and cultural dimensions of the conflict.

I will never forget my first visit to Yad Vashem — the Holocaust Museum — in Jerusalem. You walk down and down the long museum, further underground, as the narrative of the Holocaust unfolds. The slender prism of light entering from the world above grows increasingly faint, until you reach the point in the timeline when the camps are liberated, at which point you begin to move upward, toward the light.

At one point in the descent, you stand before a large chart prepared for a Nazi conference on the so-called “final solution.” The chart lists the number of Jews in the world by country – a total of 11 million. What you realize, with chilling clarity, is that for the Nazis this chart wasn’t a census: it was a list of targets. By the end of the war, they were more than halfway to their goal.

Half a century earlier, a Hungarian Jew named Theodor Herzl had looked at the status of Jews in Europe and concluded that Anti-Semitism could neither be cured nor defeated, and that the only way to avoid it was to create a Jewish state. Following the publication of his book titled *The Jewish State* in 1896, European Jews began to emigrate from Europe to Palestine, where they started laying the groundwork for a Jewish state.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, as the British Mandate over Palestine came to an end, the United Nations passed Resolution 181 in 1947, calling for the establishment of a Jewish state and a Palestinian state in Palestine. In May 1948, Israel declared its independence, which led several surrounding Arab states to declare war. In the ensuing conflict, an estimated 700,000 Palestinians were dispossessed from their land. With varying degrees of intensity, the conflict has persisted ever since.

Since 1948, the freedom of Palestinians to live their lives where and as they choose has been substantially curtailed, especially for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza who are not citizens of Israel. Their suffering has been palpable and pervasive. The Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza rightly feel marginalized and demoralized; many justifiably feel trapped and outraged. Their lack of reasonable access to medical care, education, and work — not to mention their lack of freedom to travel to visit family and friends — is not only a denial of human dignity, but in some cases has been a major violation of human rights.

The state of Israel became necessary because Jews need to have somewhere in the world where their safety and security can be guaranteed. The state of Palestine became necessary because Palestinians need the same. Because Palestine is the ancient homeland of both Jews and Palestinians, the present-day conflict has developed from this conundrum.

Over the past week, a song has been running through my mind that expresses both the burden and the terror of this situation. The song was written by David Bowie and Freddie Mercury of the band Queen.

The lyrics read, in part:

Pressure: pushing down on me  
Pressing down on you, no one asked for  
Under pressure that burns a building down  
Splits a family in two  
Puts people on streets  
That's the terror of knowing  
What this world is about...

Most days, as people go about their daily lives in Israel, the West Bank, and even in Gaza, it's easy to underestimate the pressure — to think that the disparities can be managed, the conflict contained, the dreams of freedom and peace deferred. But sometimes they can't.

On Thursday I received a long email from a Palestinian friend and colleague who established an Arab-Jewish organization in Gaza and southern Israel to effect social change and build community resilience. She writes, "It's disheartening to see 25 years of my hard work seemingly crumble before my eyes. Unfortunately, on both sides, innocent people are bearing the brunt of a world leadership that observed the situation of Gaza for the past 17 years but didn't take decisive action. This generation in Gaza is born into a world marred by war and poverty. They've grown up witnessing a relentless cycle of conflict, violence, distraction, bloodshed, grief, humiliation, and fear. With a staggering 62% unemployment rate, the young generation has lost hope and dreams for a better future. When life is so dire, they feel they have nothing to lose, and the conditions of war and blockade crush their spirits."

"What happens to a dream deferred?" The Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes asks:

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

Writing on Facebook on Thursday, Professor Oren Yitachel of Ben-Gurion University, located about 25 miles east of Gaza, observes that in carrying out the biggest one-day massacre in the history of the conflict between the Jews and the Palestinians, Hamas revived the historical Jewish fears of oppression and extermination — a trauma that cannot yet be dealt with and will not be forgiven. “This is not only a crime and moral degradation,” he says, “but also a severe blow to the just struggle of the Palestinian people for freedom and equality, as well as to the vast majority of people in both nations that support reconciliation and equality.”

Yitachel adds that the background to these events is important, which includes 75 years of ongoing Jewish colonization, land grabbing, and humiliation of Palestinians. “Of course,” he says, “these do not justify the massacre in the Gaza Strip, but they explain the repeated outbreak of Palestinian rebellions.”

Nir Avishai Cohen is a major in the reserves of the Israeli Defense Forces and author of the book *Love Israel, Support Palestine*. He was in Austin, Texas for work last Saturday when he received a call from his commander to return to Israel and head to the front line. He didn’t hesitate.

In his guest essay on Friday in the New York Times, he writes that there is one thing he wants to say clearly before he goes into battle: He says, “This war could have been avoided, and no one did enough to prevent it. Israel did not do enough to make peace; we just conquered the Palestinian territories in the West Bank, expanded the illegal settlements and imposed a long-term siege on the Gaza Strip.”

He continues:

I am now going to defend my country against enemies who want to kill my people. Our enemies are the deadly terrorist organizations that are being controlled by Islamic extremists. Palestinians aren’t the enemy. The millions of Palestinians who live right here next to us, between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan, are not our enemy. Just like the majority of Israelis want to live a calm, peaceful and dignified life, so do Palestinians. Israelis and Palestinians alike have been in the grip of a religious minority for decades. On both sides, the intractable positions of a small group have dragged us into violence...

As a major in the reserves, it is important to me to make it clear that in this already unstoppable new war, we cannot allow the massacre of innocent Israelis to result in the massacre of innocent Palestinians. Israel must remember that there are more than two million people living in the Gaza Strip. The vast majority of them are innocent. Israel must do everything in its power to avoid killing innocent people, and focus on destroying the militant army of Hamas.

Cohen concludes his column by saying, “At the end, after all of the dead Israelis and Palestinians are buried, after we have finished washing away the rivers of blood, the people who share a home in this land will have to understand that there is no other choice but to follow the path of peace. That is where true victory lies.”

The path to peace begins with the commitment not to return evil for evil — not to allow your enemies to provoke you into becoming like them. In a 1967 speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. insisted that people who are concerned about justice and truth can never advocate violence. He said, “For through violence you may murder a murderer, but you can’t murder murder. Through violence you may murder a liar, but you can’t establish truth. Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can’t murder hate through violence. Darkness cannot put out darkness; only light can do that. And I say to you, I have decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to humankind’s problems... And I’m not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I’m talking about a strong, demanding love.”

I don’t expect the generals in the Israeli Defense Forces who are planning the invasion of Gaza to list love as one of their strategic priorities. But I do hope that they wage this war in a way that will enable them to look at themselves in the mirror after it’s over and say that they maintained their humanity.

The song “Under Pressure” gets around to the same point in the end.

Can't we give ourselves one more chance?  
Why can't we give love that one more chance?

Love dares you to care for the people on the edge of the night  
Love dares you to change our way of caring about ourselves

There are a lot of people today in Israel, in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and especially in Gaza, who are on the edge of night. The families and neighbors of the people in Jewish towns and villages east of Gaza who have been massacred or kidnapped. The families and neighbors of the Israeli soldiers who have been killed in combat. The innocent civilians in Gaza, including some US citizens, who are now trapped between the murderous brutality of Hamas and the resolute vengeance of the Israeli Defense Forces. The Palestinian citizens of Israel living in Nazareth, Haifa, Jaffa, and other cities in Israel who have family members in Gaza. The vast majority of Jews in Israel and Palestine who are terrified about what the future holds for them and their families. My heart breaks for all of them, and with them I pray fervently for peace.

Even as love dares us to care for people on the edge, it also dares us to change our way of caring about ourselves. Maybe the path of love and reconciliation is too distant a goal for now, when emotions are too raw and painful, and outrage too overwhelming.

A Jewish friend and colleague who teaches at Hebrew University in Jerusalem put it to me this way. Our moral challenge now, she says, is to hold complex and

contradictory emotions in our heads and hearts at one and the same time. And to recognize that all around us, there are others also holding complex and contradictory emotions. And that we need to hear one another, listen to one another, open our minds, not allow ourselves to hold only one truth. “It’s just holding the contradictions,” she says, “and knowing that they exist, are exhausting, and need to be supported until they form threads of shared identity.”

Last Saturday evening, a message was sent to activist groups in Jaffa, the ancient Palestinian port city that is now part of southern Tel Aviv. It announced the establishment of a joint Arab-Jewish civil patrol to protect local residents, regardless of religious or ethnic background, should clashes erupt among them. Within hours, some 1,000 Jews and Arabs had joined. They were all ready to make sure the events of May 2021, when inter-communal riots broke out in Jaffa and other “mixed” cities during a round of fighting between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza, wouldn’t be repeated.

Ramzi Abi Taleb, a Palestinian who heads one of the neighborhood councils in Jaffa, said of the effort, “In the seven years I have been active [as head of the council], we have experienced many crises, and during every conflict we Arabs and Jews have joined forces to help out – and we have prevailed.”

I close with a reminder of the enduring role religion plays in maintaining the values upon which civilization depends. In his book *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that economic superpowers have relatively short lifespans of a century or so, while the great religions survive for thousands of years. What the great religions remind us, Sacks says, is that “civilizations survive not by strength but by how they respond to the weak; not by wealth but by the care they show for the poor; not by power but by their concern for the powerless.”

He adds, “The ironic yet utterly humane lesson of history is that what renders a culture invulnerable is the compassion it shows to the vulnerable. The ultimate value we should be concerned to maximize is human dignity – the dignity of all human beings, equally, as children of the creative, redeeming God.”