

## Truth and Peace in the Middle East

There was a time when Israel had a good political leader. And yes, I mean *a* time. His name was Hezekiah, and he was king of Judah about 2,700 years ago. We read in the book of Second Kings:

בִּיהֲנֶה אֱלֹהֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּטַח, "In the Eternal, the God of Israel, did he trust; and there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those before him. He clung to the Eternal and did not turn from following God, keeping the commandments the Eternal commanded Moses" (2 Kings 18:4-5).

According to the Bible, Hezekiah was the best king we could ever hope for, probably until the coming of the messiah. And yet, even he had a fatal flaw.

The prophet Isaiah delivers to him a devastating vision: "A time is coming when everything in your palace ... will be carried off to Babylon; nothing will be left behind" (2 Kings 20:17 ≈ Isaiah 39:6). Isaiah portends that even Hezekiah's own children will be traded as slaves in the Babylonian court. And how does Hezekiah reply? "He said to Isaiah, 'The Eternal's word that you have spoken is *good*!' For he thought to himself *שְׁלוֹם וְאֱמֶת יִהְיֶה בְיָמַי*, *in my own days*, there will be peace and truth" (2 Kings 20:19 ≈ Isaiah 39:8). Confronted with the fact that his family and his nation faced certain ruin, Hezekiah contented himself with knowing that it would happen *later*. As long as *he'd* be around, there would be truth and peace.

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For decades, the leadership of the State of Israel has been guilty of the same fatal flaw. Ever since the seizure of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip at the end of the 1967 War, the Israeli peace movement and their allies across the globe have insisted that the status quo is immoral and unstable. But the dream of two states for two peoples had many enemies, including intransigent Israelis who benefitted from maintaining that status quo. Palestinian terrorists who sought to disrupt the peace movement got their way as Israeli leaders – bolstered by a fearful Israeli society – insisted that occupation was the only way to maintain a reasonable semblance of security. Disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005 resulted in that region's hostile takeover by Hamas, a situation tolerated and even supported by the policies of Benjamin Netanyahu and his government. Each successive generation has whispered to itself *שְׁלוֹם וְאֱמֶת יִהְיֶה בְיָמַי*, "In

my own days, there will be peace and truth,” refusing to complete the difficult work of reconciliation.

I am not Israeli — and I am not Palestinian — so I can’t share a personal experience of this conflict plaguing the land. Nor am I a historian to unravel its immense complexities. I am not a journalist to recount its details nor a political scientist to diagnose its resolution. I have my opinions, sure, and my own list of people to blame. But I read the news just like you do, and your political insights are just as keen as my own. What I can do, and what we can strive to do together, is to channel the insight of our tradition, to heed its sacred voices in the context of the vastly difficult and painful dilemmas facing not only Israel and Palestine but Jews and people of good conscience all across the globe.

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*Shalom ve-emet*, Hezekiah desires: Peace and truth. These are among the classic, central, enduring values of our people and our congregation, inscribed on two of our sanctuary’s stained-glass windows. The values with which we surround ourselves in this beautiful space are the grounding for each of my sermons this High Holy Day season, and there could be no more fitting pair to examine in light of the crisis we continue to face.

To consider what truth and peace might mean in light of the war in Gaza, we must first be sure we know what we’re talking about.

We begin with truth. To stand for truth means promoting and defending what we believe to be right, even and especially when it’s unpopular or hard. Our media landscape is awash with distortion and falsehood, and apathy drains public discourse from responding to urgent moral demands. We’ve seen it before; as the Psalmist says, “They neither know nor understand; they go about in darkness” (Ps. 82:5) — and one sage explains: *They do not understand* to judge fairly as true what is true. And therefore, *they go about in darkness*, which is a symbol for justice, which is the light of the world and the foundation of the earth.”<sup>1</sup> Devotion to truth means knowing what’s right and confidently trying to act accordingly.

Peace is best understood by its Hebrew name *Shalom*. From the root שָׁלַם, meaning whole, peace means togetherness: coexistence, tolerance, and embrace. Peace is characterized by a yearning for unity, and even though conflict is a natural and necessary part of life, we are taught ever to “seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:15). Thus the midrash teaches: “Great is peace, and division is despised. Great is peace, that

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<sup>1</sup> Malbim on Ps. 82:5.

even in a time of war we need peace” (Sifrei B’midbar 42:22). There is no greater blessing than peace, which is the end of our prayers.

Truth and peace, *emet v’shalom*, are bedrocks of proper Jewish life. Thus the prophets Zechariah (8:16) and Malachi (2:6) both exhort us to conduct ourselves with truth and peace. And Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel would later teach, על שלשה דברים העולם עומד, “On three things does the world stand: on justice, on truth, and on peace; and those three are the same. When justice is done, there is truth; when truth is made, there is peace.”<sup>3</sup>

We strive for peaceful truth and truthful peace – but what if we have one without the other?

Truth without peace can be intransigence, an unwillingness to compromise or to see another’s point of view.<sup>4</sup> Though we are rightly skeptical of the loose regard for truth in today’s age of “truthiness,” we nevertheless inherit a tradition that insists that competing truths can all be valid. Thus when the Psalmist appeals to God to “rescue me from the treacherous and dishonest” (Ps. 43:1), he also prays שלח-אורה ואמתה, “Send your light and your truth. They will lead me ... to your abode” (Ps. 43:3). Not “defend my truth,” but help me see *divine* truth. Thus the modern Hebrew poet, Yehuda Amichai’s poignant line: “From the place where we are right / flowers will never grow / in the spring.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> גדול שלום ושנאוי המחלוקת. גדול שלום שאפלו בשעת מלחמה צריכים שלום

<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem Talmud Taanit 4:2. The passage continues: “Rabbi Mana said, and all are in one verse, *judge truth and law of peace in your gates* (Zechariah 8:16)”. The Hebrew follows:

רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר. על שלשה דברים העולם עומד. על הדין ועל האמת והשלום. ושלשתן דבר אחד הן. נעשה הדין נעשה האמת. נעשה האמת נעשה שלום. אמר רבי מנא. ושלשתן בפסוק אחד. אמת ומשפט שלום שפטו בשעריכם.

This passage would later be reformulated as Pirkei Avot 1:18.

רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר, על שלשה דברים העולם עומד, על הדין ועל האמת ועל השלום, שנאמר (זכריה ח) אמת ומשפט שלום שפטו בשעריכם:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel used to say: “On three things does the world stand: On justice, on truth and on peace,” as it is said: *Execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates* (Zechariah 8:16).

<sup>4</sup> See PT Sanhedrin 1:1:24

רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר. מצוה לבצע. שנאמר אמת ומשפט שלום. כל מקום שיש אמת אין משפט שלום. יש שלום אין משפט אמת. ואי זהו אמת שיש בו משפט שלום. הוי אומר. זה ביצוע.

Rabbi Joshua ben Karcha says, it is a good deed to mediate a compromise, as it is said: *Truth and judgment of peace* (Zech. 8:16, the same verse referenced above). If there is truth, there is no judgment of peace. If there is peace, there is no judgment of truth. **What is truth containing a judgment of peace? I am saying, this is compromise.**

<sup>5</sup> From *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, by Yehuda Amichai, translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell. See <https://onbeing.org/poetry/the-place-where-we-are-right/>.

And peace without truth is conciliation, letting the facts recede for the benefit of holding people close. On the one hand, this is a concession that our tradition is often willing to make, as our texts are replete with examples of truth bending for peace. The Torah shows Rebecca (Genesis 27:46), Jacob (Gen. 33:14), and even God (Gen. 18:13) telling lies in order to prevent violence or shame,<sup>6</sup> and multiple Rabbinic midrashim do the same.<sup>7</sup> Thus the 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholar, Rabbi Hayim David Halevi, concluded, “While the seal of God is truth, [God’s] Name is Peace. Therefore, it is no surprise that in a time of distress that we do not seize the seal of God, but his rely on [God’s] holy or Great Name.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, peace is often paramount, even at the cost of truth.<sup>9</sup>

The prophet Jeremiah, though, is very concerned about false peace. He cries to heaven, “Oh Lord God! See the prophets are saying to them ‘You shall not see the sword; famine will not come upon you. For I am giving you *שָׁלוֹם אֱמֶת*, true peace...” (Jeremiah 14:13). And God cries back, “It is a lie!” (Jer. 14:13). God denounces this deception, designed to mollify the populace into unjustified complacency. These false prophets promise *שָׁלוֹם וְאֵין שָׁלוֹם*, “Peace! Peace! But there is no peace” (Jer. 8:11). These warnings highlight the difference between a *true peace* and a *false peace*. To preserve a *true peace*, it’s okay to bend the facts from time to time. But a false peace based on lies takes the exception much too far.

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How do we tell the difference? What distinguishes a true peace from a false one? This nearly impossible conundrum leads us back to the difficult issues of Israel and Gaza. And let’s assume that I don’t have all the answers that have so far eluded pundits and presidents and professors and priests. Instead, I offer ways of thinking and talking about the issues so that when we do take action, we do so with integrity and the backing of our ancestors.

Reasonable people can disagree on what a true peace might look like in Israel and Palestine. If the hostages are restored, rockets stay on the ground, tanks return to base, and ceasefire prevails; if the dead are buried and the wounded treated, schools and hospitals rebuilt and markets restocked with food – and Gaza and the West Bank remain under Israeli authority, would this be a true peace? To some: Yes. To others, certainly not. And so too if the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea becomes free of bloodshed, if children study Arabic and Hebrew and English

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<sup>6</sup> See also I Samuel 16:2.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Sifrei B’midbar 42:2, PT Peah 1:1, and BT Yevamot 65b.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in David Ellenson’s “A Jewish Ethic of Truth Based on the Responsa of Rabbi Haim David Halevi,” in Zierler, Wendy, and Joshua Garroway, editors, *These Truths We Hold: Judaism in an Age of Truthiness* (Hebrew Union College Press, 2022), page unknown (shared with me in draft form).

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it is taught that the Torah was given only for the sake of peace. See, for example, ,Midrash Tanhuma, Toldot 1:3: *שָׁלוֹם בְּשָׁבִיל שָׁלוֹם*, “Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: Great is peace, that the words of Torah [include] lies for the sake of peace.”

together in common secular schools, if a newly-created Israel-Palestine erects a democratic government – and religion is extracted from public life, effectively erasing the world's only Jewish state. This, too, would be heralded by some as a true peace and decried by others as utterly false.

People who differ in politics, religion and region are likely to hold very different truths. We've seen this play out even here in America as we view events in the Middle East through a myriad of lenses. Some of us have direct experience in Israel or the Palestinian territories; some have close family or friends there. Our news can come from Israelis or Palestinians, Americans or foreign journalists, in Hebrew, Arabic, or English. The stories we remember may focus on violent attacks, vibrant images, or vicious political debate. At times, we may be consumed by what happens in Israel and Gaza – for personal or religious reasons or maybe because our friends and colleagues demand an answer from us as Jews. At other times, we may be fairly ignorant, lost in the swirl of who declined which ceasefire and how many hundreds of days have elapsed since October 7. All of these factors lead each one of us, as completely rational, generally good people to have different – sometimes wildly different – views of what really counts as “true” and, therefore, what might entail true peace.

But there is one element I believe will be essential to establishing a true peace in the years ahead. It emerges from this morning's haftarah and ultimately insists that, no matter what else we do or think or believe, we have a divine obligation to heed the cries of the suffering. This may not be an ending-place, but it is a necessary place to begin.

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We read in our haftarah of a vision of Jeremiah (chapter 31), one of his rare prophecies of restoration after bitter destruction and humiliating exile. It describes Israel's triumphant return to Zion, born of God's love and as miraculous as their escape from Egypt. God hears their desperate call for help and restores the surviving remnant to their homeland of promise. But one verse signals a turn. קוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע, “A voice is heard in Ramah – wailing, bitter weeping – Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, for they are gone” (Jer. 31:15). Why is Rachel, the legendary favored wife of Jacob, inconsolably crying?

One answer comes from Eichah Rabbah (Petichta, section 24), the collection of Rabbinic stories about the book of Lamentations. God sees the ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem, destroyed by the Babylonian army, and cries bitterly. Grief-stricken, God directs Jeremiah to rouse from the dead Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses וְהָאֵלֹהִים יוֹדְעִים לִבְכּוֹת, “Since they know how to cry.”

Abraham is the first to accuse God, referring to the events of this morning's Torah reading: “Master of the universe: Why did You exile my children, deliver them

into the hand of the nations, kill them with all kinds of uncommon deaths, and destroy the Temple, the place where I elevated my son Isaac as a burnt offering before You?" God insists that Israel deserved it for violating the Torah. Isaac, too, speaks out: "I was bound willingly upon the altar and extended my neck under the knife. Will You not remember this on my behalf and have mercy on my descendants?" Jacob and Moses pile on their troubles as well, recalling Jacob's harrowing family dramas and Moses's harsh decree to die outside the Land. Still, though God had summoned them to cry, their cries make no difference. They beg and scream and argue and wail, and all for naught. גְּנוּרָה הִיא מִלְפָּנַי, "It is a decree before me."

And then, unbidden, קָפְצָה רָחֵל אִמּוֹנו, "Our mother Rachel leapt up," the same Rachel who bore the beloved Joseph and died giving birth to Benjamin. She recalls her rivalry with her sister, Leah, and also her overwhelming love for her. She accuses God of inexcusable cruelty, of causing unfathomable damage to a people whose transgressions were relatively minor, and on the merit of her own ability to find peace with her sister despite their serious strife, she demands that God bring peace to her descendants.

The men who argued with God were all silenced by the Eternal King's decree. But not Rachel. מֵאַנְיָה לְהַנְחִיחַ, "She refuses to be comforted" (Jer. 31:15). Whatever God says, she will not be silent; she shouts right in God's face and simply will not stop. This is the plea – steady, passionate, and pure – that turns God's heart, that tempers judgment into mercy, and plants the seed of redemption.

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And this is the plea we need today. When God sees the rubble of God's abode on earth, God immediately appoints spokesmen to raise a shout of protest. God *wants* the protest, God *needs* to hear the pain. In a midrash, God says: "When I am victorious [in judgment], I lose; and when you are victorious [against Me], I gain."<sup>10</sup> And this is a model for us as well. Any genuine attempt to consider a future of peace and truth must include and account for cries of pain. God hears Rachel's voice, and we need to hear the pain of those suffering: in Israel, in Gaza, and in the West Bank.

We need to hear the cries of those slain on October 7 and those who died in captivity and who are still held there as well as those of their family and friends. We need to hear the anguish of an Israeli society under siege by foreign adversaries, deployed into military service by a government they often mistrust, and constantly on edge, fearful, and in mourning. And we need to hear the cries of Palestinians killed by an Israeli military onslaught in Gaza, those whose bellies ache for lack of food and whose wounds persist for want of medicine, whose shelters are rubble and whose hope

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<sup>10</sup> Pesikta Rabbati 40:1.

for a better tomorrow is meager and dim. We need to heed the immense suffering caused by Israeli military force in Gaza as well as the brutal intimidation of Palestinian residents of the West Bank.

We may feel the temptation to compare these cries, to assess whose grief is more acute and whose loss is more grotesque. To be honest, I'm not sure how to make that calculation or whether we should even try. In the end, though, I believe that all these cries of pain need to be heard. The blast of the shofar is one loud sound that must, this year, be multiplied a millionfold.

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We pray, as always, for peace. And we know that the truth of the situation is that there are many truths of the situation. And so as we pray for *emet v'shalom*, a true peace, a peace that hears everyone's voice, that reckons with violence and hatred and damage and control, a peace built for the long-haul, made among enemies with the shared conviction that it's worth the costs incurred.

We pray for all victims of this war: Israelis and Palestinians, their regional neighbors and those all around the globe caught up in this terrible conflict. And we know that true peace must acknowledge the many contrasting truths held by those who grasp it. But at the heart of it all, at the base of our prayer and the root of our understanding, is the basic act of listening to pain. This sacred listening is a starting-place, the foundation of our own opinions and a bedrock of the solutions we wish to see.

And then we have hope. Our midrash concludes, after God hears Rachel's cry, with one last quote from our haftarah. וְיֵשׁ תִּקְוָה, "And there is hope for your future, declares the Eternal" (Jer. 31:17). It can seem impossible to find hope in such a painful moment, but our tradition insists that we must try. With this line concludes the prayer for the return of hostages we read earlier today, a prayer read regularly in Israeli Reform Jewish gatherings.<sup>11</sup> Even and especially at such a bleak moment, in Israel and, I pray, in Palestine and, I'm sure, the world around, the possibility of hope is vital. There can be no true peace without it.

May this hope fuel our prayers. May we stand for our views while making room for the views of others, and may we commit ourselves to a path of healing and security in Gaza and Israel. And may we work for the day when שְׁלוֹם וְאֵמֶת יִהְיֶה בְּיָמֵינוּ, in our days will be peace and truth.

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<sup>11</sup> Shared by Rabbi Ofek Meir of Haifa's Leo Baeck Education Center during a rabbinic webinar with the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism on September 15, 2025. The prayer is here: <https://opensiddur.org/prayers/collective-welfare/trouble/captivity/prayer-for-the-release-of-the-hostages-by-noa-mazor/>