

You Shall Inquire Well, Even in the Wilderness

Our Torah portion this week – and the opening of the book of Numbers – begins, “The Eternal spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai” (Num. 1:1).

I don't know about you, but this week, I feel particularly “in the wilderness.” Nicholas Kristof's explosive allegations of widespread sexual torture of Palestinian prisoners are horrifying.¹ And the subsequent whirlwind of amplifications, qualifications, and refutations are dizzying.² For those who recognize the cruelty of Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel's Minister of National Security with a background in violently racist Kahanism and with authority over Israel's police forces, Kristof's portrait of Israeli security is both credible and infuriating. And for those familiar with libels against Jews and the Jewish state not only since October 7th but as long ago as our memory can stretch, these charges sound more like conspiratorial lies than investigated truths.

As many commentators have noted, Kristof's article was published as opinion, not news. Thus he may have avoided the rigorous fact-checking and thorough source-credentialed expected of classic journalism in “the newspaper of record.” At the same time, Kristof's *bona fides* are well-established: he won a Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting in 1990 and a second Pulitzer for Commentary in 2006, and his 2009 book *Half the Sky* focused on sexual exploitation in developing countries. It seems that many people have judged the veracity of his claims on whether they *want* them to be true; those with animus against Israel are eager to accept them, and those whose instinct is to defend the Jews and their state cry foul.

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What does Jewish wisdom offer us when things seem so unclear? The book of Deuteronomy presents several examples of claims demanding investigation, and I think each one of them might pertain to our current situation.

In the first instance, a report is received that scoundrels are plotting some idolatrous rite in secret – in this case, וְדַרְשׁוּ וְחַקְרוּ וְשִׂאֵלְתָּ הֵיטֵב, “You shall inquire and investigate and interrogate well” (Deut. 13:15) and then act on what you find.

Alternatively, even if you catch someone in the act of scandalous idolatry, still וְדַרְשׁוּ הֵיטֵב, “You shall inquire well” (Deut. 17:4) to verify the charge beyond doubt. And

¹ “The Horror of Sexual Assault in Israeli Prisons,” <https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000010886586/the-horror-of-sexual-assault-in-israeli-prisons.html>.

² One response from a credible journalist is Haviv Rettig Gur's “A response to Nicholas Kristof of the NYT,” <https://havivgur.substack.com/p/a-response-to-nicholas-kristof-of>.

finally, if witnesses bear false testimony against a fellow, וְדָרְשׁוּ הַשֹּׁפְטִים הַיָּטִב, “The judges shall inquire well” (Deut. 19:18); if they find that the testimony was indeed cooked up, “you shall do to them what they conspired to do to their brother” (Deut. 19:18). In all three cases, and even if guilt seems completely obvious, a thorough investigation is required.

This, I believe, is wise guidance at all times, and particularly in the current moment. The magnitude of the alleged crimes is certainly no reason to disregard them, nor is it a reason to accept them at face value. It seems clear to me that Nicholas Kristof is a credible source, though it’s not as clear to me that *his* sources are credible – so someone needs to check. The Israeli government is currently trying to sue the *New York Times* for defamation; but they should actually be conducting a rigorous review of their practices to identify and properly punish any guilty actors and to establish safeguards against potential abusive behavior moving forward. The overarching critique raised by Kristof’s article is the *laissez-faire* attitude of Israel’s leaders, who may not condone humiliation and violence but who also refrain from rooting it out. Police brutality is common in Israel – a fact we in Chicago can identify with – and Kristof’s stinging rebuke should serve as a wakeup call to clean up and clean out.

Kristof’s article was published at nearly the same time that a lengthy and well-documented report was issued about sexual violence committed by Hamas.³ This report, I believe, is the result of precisely the kind of intense investigation that Kristof’s claims deserve. Whether or not we were inclined to believe the allegations of sexual violence during and after October 7th – and I, for one, did believe them – this report should settle all doubt. Similarly, whether or not we are inclined to believe Kristof’s allegations, our tradition insists upon thorough investigation, which I believe is warranted in this case.

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The brutality of these crimes is traumatizing, designed to inflict not only physical pain but also psychological damage. In the face of such violence – committed by Hamas fighters and, perhaps, by Israeli soldiers – how can we possibly envision a future of peace? I admit, it can be hard. But there are glimmers of hope.

When today’s sun rose, it was Yom Yerushalayim, a day commemorating Israel’s capture of Jerusalem in the Six-Day War. And today is also Nakba Day, a day commemorating Palestinians’ devastating displacement during Israel’s War of Independence. On the same week when these two reports are released, and on the same day when these two vastly different commemorations occur, we might think that Jewish Israelis and their Diaspora supporters live in a different world from Palestinians.

And yet, earlier today, Palestinians and Jewish Israelis convened in Jerusalem for the seventh annual gathering dedicated to our tireless hope for peace. Organized by the Israeli organization Combatants for Peace and supported by institutions worldwide like

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/12/world/middleeast/israel-sexual-violence-hamas-attack-report.html>

Friends of Standing Together and T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, this commemoration dares to say that we must, somehow, continue to hold peace in our hearts and as goals before our eyes.

In the past, this gathering has concluded with the powerful song *Chad Gadya*. Known to us from the Passover seder, this song poetically depicts a cycle of violence stretching from kicking dogs to killing humans. But at any stage along the way, we can intervene – we can catch the cat or stay the ox or hold the butcher's knife. Our journey to Shavuot – the holiday of Torah and revelation – begins with the promise of freedom reimagined every year at Pesach. So as we look toward the week ahead, we anticipate the celebration of Shavuot and drawing inspiration from its teachings to give us the wisdom and courage to wage peace wherever we can.

As we navigate the wilderness, let us keep Torah in our minds and on our hearts. Let us resolve to pursue the truth wherever it may lead. And let us never tire of the most difficult and important duty of all, the pursuit of peace.