

Doresh Tzion

Perspectives from our Roshei Yeshiva
and Rabbeim in Response to
October 7th and its Aftermath

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Israel at War 5784: Three Fronts

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I believe I speak for most of us when I say that for the last couple of weeks we have not been able to think about anything other than the terrible attack on our brothers and sisters in Israel and the looming darkness that lies ahead.

Will Durant remarked that barbarism, like the jungle, never dies out, it only retreats behind the barriers that civilization has thrown up against it and waits there always to reclaim that to which civilization has temporarily laid claim. That is what we all saw on October 7th: pure evil and barbarism asserting itself from behind the walls to try to destroy the civilization that we, the Jewish people, have built, not just over the last century, but over the last four millennia.

I cannot speak for others, but for me, personally, I watch the video clips of the heinous evil that Hamas perpetrated, and I look at the pictures. The video clips, the pictures, are very dark. They keep you up at night. But in my opinion, that is the only way to understand the type of evil that is being perpetrated against the Jewish people in our day: “*zachor es asher asah licha Amalek*” (*Devarim* 25:17). If you look at the images of the men, women, and children who were burnt alive in the South of Israel, it is worse than the most graphic imagery in *Eichah* or *Yirmiyahu*.

I was born in 1989. There has not been such a devastating attack against Jews in my lifetime. The newspapers report that this is the worst attack against Jews since the Holocaust. But there is something deeper and more tragic about the October 7th attack. The fact that it was an attack against Jews living in the sovereign homeland of the Jewish people in *Eretz Yisrael* makes it more urgent and more egregious than what was perpetrated against our people in Eastern Europe.

Lest you think this *eis tzara*—this sense of urgency or crisis—is behind us, pay careful attention to the northern border of Israel with Hezbollah. Pay close attention to the violence in Yehudah and Shomron, where two million Arabs have the potential to rise up, not just against the *yishuvim* there, but also against the *merkaz*—the center—of Israel. Pay careful attention to the warnings that come out of Iran and Yemen.

The United States has sent two aircraft carrier strike groups to the Middle East for a reason. There is a real sense that darkness lies on the horizon, darkness that has the power not only to end thousands of Jewish of lives, but to undermine the very existence of the modern State of Israel.

The Two-Pronged Response: *Eis Tzara* and *Milchemes Mitzvah*

What are we to do in this moment of crisis? Today I will articulate the two principles of *halachah* that I believe should guide our response. The first is that of *milchemes mitzvah*, waging war against our enemy to protect our people and our homeland. The second is that of *darkei hateshuvah*, the theological obligations of

repentance and prayer that are triggered by an *eis tzara* (time of distress).

I want to emphasize that each of these principles is separate from the other, and we are charged to respond by implementing both of them. We do not satisfy our obligation of *milchemes mitzvah* by engaging in *darkei hateshuvah*, just as we do not fulfill *darkei hateshuvah* by waging a *milchemes mitzvah*.

I'll begin with *darkei hateshuvah*. I won't develop this principle at great length today because we have already heard much about the importance of religious improvement here at Yeshiva in the aftermath of October 7th. I will devote more time developing the principle of *milchemes mitzvah* because that has been absent from the yeshiva's messaging. The focus on *darkei hateshuvah* has eclipsed the importance of *milchemes mitzvah*.

As I said, one prong of the Jewish response to an *eis tzarah* is *darkei hateshuva*, which the Rambam codifies in the first chapter of *Hilchos Ta'anuyos*. There is an obligation to introspect and repent, to call out in *tefillah*, to cry to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* that we should be saved, and to sound the *chatzotzros* and the *shofar* as we *daven*. Some *Risbonim* (Ramban *hasagos* to *Sefer Hamitzvos, asef 5*) believe that the *tefillah* of an *eis tzara* is the only type of *tefillah* mandated by the Torah.

The other principle, *milchemes mitzvah*, is equally, if not more important. The Rambam codifies the laws of *milchemes mitzvah* in the fifth chapter of *Hilchos Melachim U'Milchamoseihem*. He explains

that when an oppressor comes and attacks the Jewish people, we are charged by the Torah to wage war against that enemy and to fight them. This is the category of *milchemes mitzvah* triggered by “*ezras Yisrael m’yad tzar sheba aleihem*” (5:1).

We do not need to learn the entire *sugya* now. It does not matter for us today whether the Rambam’s *makor* is the *Bavli* in *Eruvin*, the *Bavli* in *Sotah* or the *Yerushalmi*. What is important—and I believe uncontroversial and obvious—is that the horrific attack of October 7th—the most horrific attack against Jews in our lifetime, the most horrendous attack against the Jewish people in the Land of Israel since the creation of the State, triggers the *halachah* of *milchemes mitzvah* of *ezras Yisrael m’yad tzar sheba aleihem*.

A *milchemes mitzvah* is a Torah-mandated war. This not only means that the Torah obligates us to wage such a war, but that one who participates in it is performing a *mitzvah*. The Rambam writes in his commentary on the Mishnah (*Sotah* 8:7), based on the Gemara in *Sotah* (44b), that the *din* of “*osek bamitzvah patur min hamitzvah*” applies to someone engaged in a *milchemes mitzvah*. If you have been called up to fight, you are *patur* from *krias shema* and *tefillah*—whatever you need to be exempt from—because you are involved in the *mitzvah* of *milchamah*. In my opinion, this also applies to people who provide logistical support in the rear, *mesapekim mayim umazon* (providing food and water to soldiers, *op. cit.* 43a), contributing to the war effort. They too are engaged in *milchemes mitzvah*.

If you think this law of *milchemes mitzvah* obligates Jews living

in Israel to participate in the war effort but not Jews in America, you have confused your Judaism with the political entity that governs the State of Israel. The category of *milchemes mitzvah* is not a special *din* for citizens of the State of Israel. Nor is it a special *din* for soldiers that have enlisted with the IDF. The Gemara in *Sotah* (ibid.) teaches us that for a *milchemes mitzvah*, in contrast with a *milchemes reshvus*, “*hakol yotzin, afilu chasan mechedro vekallah meichupasah*—every single member of the Jewish people is responsible to participate in the war effort. This obligates American Jewry, Israeli Jewry, and European Jewry with equal force.

I commend you if you are coming to *seder* fifteen minutes early. It is great if you are *davening* with more *kavanah*. It is great if you are adding some *Tehillim* to your *davening*. But that is only one part of the two-pronged response. It pertains exclusively to *darkei hateshuvah*, in other words, to *Hilchos Ta’aniyos*. It does not satisfy, in any way, the obligation of participating in the *milchemes mitzvah*.

I know that most of us cannot pilot F-35 warplanes or maneuver Merkava tanks or chamber an M16. At the end of my remarks today, I will share how you can participate in this *milchemes mitzvah* even if you are not trained to fight on the front lines. I believe it is incumbent upon every Jew to participate in this *milchemes mitzvah* in some meaningful way.

I know that many of you are involved in other important pursuits. The *Keren Orab* writes in *Sotah* (ibid.) that the *din* of *milchemes mitzvah* binds every member of the Jewish people such that even *talmidei chachamim* are obligated to fight, to leave behind their

talmud Torah and take up arms in the *milchemes mitzvah*. This should impress upon each of you how important it is to get involved.

Three Fronts

Let us take a moment to understand the *milchemes mitzvah* that we are engaged in. When I reflect on what's happening, I discern three different fronts in the war that Israel is fighting. I do not mean three geographical fronts: a war in Gaza, a war in *Yehudah v'Shomron*, and a war in the North. What I mean, rather, is that there are three dimensions to the *milchamah*.

I want to illustrate these three dimensions by speaking about my family's history, my familial connection to the Land of Israel and to the State of Israel. Of course we all have a personal connection to Israel. We all read the *pesukim* in *Bereishis*, and Israel is a major part of Jewish life in the twenty-first century. But I want to describe, just for a moment, the centrality of Israel to me, and how it animates the DNA inside me.

My maternal grandfather, Rabbi David Eliach, was born in Yerushalayim in 1922 under the British Mandate as a seventh generation Yerushalmi—his family had lived there for six generations. They had emigrated from Poland in the early 1800s shortly after the *talmidim* of the Gra started settling in Israel. Many *Chassidim* came around the 1840s. His father's side had come from Karlin-Stolin. On his mother's side from Lelov. They moved to Israel simply because that was the aspiration of Jews over the centuries. They came as *Chassidim* who wanted to settle the land of their forefathers. They appreciated the theological significance of living in the land of the *Shechinah* and of

performing *mitzvos* in *Eretz Yisrael*. There was also an element of preparing for *yimos haMashiach* because they knew that Jewry was destined to return to the Jewish homeland.

My maternal grandmother, Yaffa Eliach, had a very different story. She was born in 1935 in Eishyshok, a Lithuanian *shtetl* in Eastern Europe that was occupied by Poland in the inter-war years. The Germans invaded the *shtetl* in 1941, and on Rosh Hashanah of that year, the Nazi *einsatzgruppen* rounded up and executed the Jews of Eishyshok. They murdered more than four thousand Jews that day. My grandmother and her immediate family fled. They hid in fields and barns. Miraculously, they survived the war in hiding.

After the war, they returned to the *shtetl*, to their home, but the Poles who had taken over the Jewish homes and businesses were displeased, to put it mildly, that the Jews had returned to reclaim their property and businesses. They launched a pogrom and went house to house attacking the beleaguered Jewish families who had survived the war and just returned. My grandmother was hiding in an attic closet with her family when the Poles arrived at her house. The Poles found the closet, dragged out my grandmother's mother and baby brother, and shot them as my grandmother looked on in horror from the deeper recesses of the closet.

So while the Nazis murdered her entire community during the war and destroyed her town, it was the Poles, after the war, displeased by the idea of Jews returning to reclaim their property, who killed her mother and baby brother.

There is a third layer of tragedy in my grandmother's story. Her father, having witnessed the murder of his wife and infant son, organized with other men of the town to smuggle weapons into the *shtetl*. They wanted to be able to protect their families should there be another pogrom. If you know the history of Poland, the Soviets occupied and controlled Poland after the war. The Soviets did not want Jews fighting with Poles under their watch, and they were not going to allow a Jewish resistance. They arrested my great grandfather and sent him to a Siberian labor camp, where he remained imprisoned until 1957.

My grandmother was nine years old when her mother was killed and her father taken away. The Nazis destroyed her town at the beginning of the war. The Poles murdered her mother immediately after the war. And the Soviets took her father away to Siberia because Jews were not allowed to defend themselves.

Effectively orphaned from her father and mother, she came to Israel as a refugee in 1946, two years before the establishment of the State. Her world and her family had been destroyed. Israel gave her a new life. Israel protected her and provided for her. Israel offered her an education with which she could rebuild her life, and a safe world to do that in, and she met my grandfather there.

She was born Shayna. Shayna, in Yiddish, means beautiful. But when she settled in Israel she changed her name to Yaffa, Hebrew for beautiful. My mother once told me that growing up, she thought her mother was Israeli. She didn't grasp that her mother had lived a whole portion of her life in Eastern Europe. That's because Israel had adopted

her and allowed her to recreate her life after the destruction and darkness of the Shoah.

I. The Battle for Eretz Yisrael

To me, these different aspects of my family story frame the central elements of the importance of the Land of Israel and the State of Israel. On my grandfather's side, it is the aspiration of pious Jews over the generations to return to *Eretz Yisrael*, to settle it and to witness the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in the land that was promised to our forefathers.

Throughout the Torah we read of the obligation to conquer and settle *Eretz Yisrael*. In Bamidbar 33, for instance, we read “*vehorashtem es ha'aretz veyashavtem bah, ki lachem nasati es ha'aretz lareshes osah*” (v. 53). It is the destiny and the duty of the Jewish people to return, to live, and to defend the borders of *Eretz Yisrael*. The Ramban, on the spot and in his *hasagos* to *Sefer Hamitzvos* (*Shikchas Ha'asin* 4), writes that it is a *mitzvas asei* for all generations, even during *galus*, for Jews—not just Jews who live in Israel, but Jews across the globe—to settle the land, to establish Jewish sovereignty there, and to defend its borders. We are warned, Ramban writes in *Sefer Hamitzvos*, not to let any other nation control or establish sovereignty in the land. He adds, “*vizu hi shebachamim korim osah milchemes mitzvah.*” (loc. cit.) This means that defending the Jewish settlement of *Eretz Yisrael* and ensuring Jewish sovereignty of the land constitutes a *milchemes mitzvah*. It is the duty of Jewry not to let any other nation control the land of Israel.

Over the last two weeks I have watched the mobs on Penn's

campus rally in support of Hamas's attack, and I have listened to their bone-chilling chants: "There is only one solution, Intifada, Revolution!" "Where people are occupied, resistance is justified!" "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!" Hamas and their sympathizers seek to drive the Jewish people out of our homeland. We are fighting to defend our claim to *Eretz Yisrael* and our right to settle it. *Vehorashtem es ha'aretz veyashavtem bab!*

II. The Battle to Rescue our Brothers and Sisters

There is a second front, a second dimension of the war. It manifests a different principle of *halachah*. In *parshas Kedoshim* we are commanded "*lo sa'amod al dam re'echa*" (*Vayikra* 19:16). When our brothers and sisters are in danger, there is an obligation upon all of us to come to their defense, to aid them. "If you see your friend drowning in a river, or attacked by wild animals, or assaulted by militants, you are commanded to save him" (*Sanhedrin* 73a).

Since October 7th, the Jewish people have been terrorized by Palestinian militants. The terrorists brutally invaded the tranquil *yishuvim* and *kibbutzim* in Southern Israel. They have launched, and continue to launch, thousands of rockets at cities across Israel, threatening the entire population of the Jewish state. Hezbollah's Radwan force is crouched on the Northern Border ready to invade the Golan, every day firing RPG's and rockets into the cities in the North. 200,000 Israelis have been forced to flee their homes and communities because of the danger. Some two hundred Israelis are being terrorized underground in Hamas tunnels, held as hostages and Human shields.

We—Jewry—must defend our nation from those who seek to

destroy us. We must provide refuge and safety to all Jews, to save them from their persecutors. We must fight to defend the lives of our people, so that “Israel may dwell in safety” (*Devarim* 33:28).

There is no institution, no entity in the world, that has done more to protect Jews across the globe than the modern State of Israel. Israel provided refuge to the survivors of the Shoah, like my grandmother. Israel rescued the Jewish communities of the Arab and Muslim countries. And Israel promises to provide refuge to any Jew in need of protection. We must support Israel in this war so that it can continue to protect the Jewish people from those who seek our annihilation. This is the second front of the *milchemes mitzvah*. *Lo sa'amod al dam re'echa!*

For me, this is the dimension of my grandmother's story. Jews lived for generations in Eastern Europe. My grandmother's *shtetl* was around for eight hundred years before the war. It was a vibrant Jewish community. It was an intellectual center of *litvishe talmud Torah*. But Jews had no way of protecting themselves. This is the three-layered tragedy of my grandmother's early life. Her town was destroyed by the Nazis at the beginning of the war. Her mother was murdered by the Poles after the war. And her father was imprisoned by the Soviets who would not allow Jews to defend themselves from their enemies.

III. The Battle Against Evil

Let me turn to the third dimension of the war, as I see it. This war is not just to defend Jewish sovereignty in *Eretz Yisrael*, of *veborashtem es ha'aretz veyashavtem bah*. It is not just a war to save Jewish lives, of *lo sa'amod al dam re'echa*. President Biden was correct

when he said that this is a war against evil. As in Middle-earth, evil forces have stirred, the likes of which this century has not known. The images of the massacre—the violation of women and the mutilation of their bodies, the burning of children, the sadism of the Hamas militants reveling in the desecration of human life and dignity—should sear your mind. Evil incarnate stirs on our borders.

Throughout *Sefer Devarim* we are charged to root out evil and to eradicate it, “*uviarta hara mikirbecha* (e.g. *Devarim* 17:7, 21:21).” This is not just an obligation incumbent upon the *Melech* or the *shoftim*. “*Yad haedim tehiyeh bo barishonah*” (*Devarim* 17:7). We cannot allow evil to gain a foothold. We have a moral and legal obligation imposed on us by the Torah to eradicate evil.

In *parshas Noach*, the Torah tells us, “*vatishacheis ha’aretz lifnei haElokim, vatimalei ha’aretz chamas*” (*Bereishis* 6:11). Evil dominated the world, and the very purpose of creation was undercut. In *parshas Vayeira*, we learn that Sodom and Amora were destroyed because they were so evil that they were no longer worthy of existence. There is no reason for the world to continue to exist if it is dominated by evil (*Rambam Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:2); “*vayomer Elokim ketz kol basar ba lefanai, ki mal’ah ha’aretz chamas lifneihem*” (*Bereishis* 6:13).

After the *mabul*, Hashem enters into a covenant with Noach. The responsibility to root out evil is assigned to Noach and his descendents. It is on this basis that Hashem agrees to forbear from destroying the world. Thus Hashem commits “never again will I destroy all life” (*Bereishis* 8:21), at the same time that he charges Noach and his descendants, “*shofech dam ha’adam, ba’adam damo yishafech,*

ki betzelem Elokim asah es ha'adam" (Bereishis 9:6).

There are two important conclusions we can derive from this verse. The first, Radak notes, is that when a human being commits murder, it is not just that he deserves to die, but that humankind is responsible to punish him, to mete out justice by executing him. "One who sheds the blood of man; by man shall his blood be shed." We are charged with extinguishing evil. In doing so, we protect the dignity of humanity. The *pasuk* reflects that we are charged to do this— "*ki betzelem Elokim asah es ha'adam*".

Radak derives a second lesson: A murderer negates his *tzelem Elokim*. One who can violate such a fundamental law of nature is not an agent animated by the divine image. "*Hu hishchis tzalmo techilah, v'avar al mitzvas haKel.*" The perpetrator corrupted his own *tzelem Elokim*, "*vehinei in tzelem Elokim la'over.*"

The Torah declares in *parshas Netzavim* (Devarim 30:15) "*re'eh nasati lifanechah hayom es bachaim ve'es hatov ve'es hamaves ve'es hara.*" Human beings are endowed with *bechirah*. When you have *bechirah*, you can choose how you are going to live. You can choose *chaim* and *tov* or you can choose *maves* and *ra*. Each individual can choose to exercise and nurture their *tzelem Elokim*. Or they can choose to negate and destroy it. The Torah implores us: "*uvacharta bachaim*" (ad cit.).

In Israel's war against Hamas, the battle against evil is also a battle against *maves* and *sheker*. Israel and Hamas have opposite value systems. On the one side, we have a society that cherishes life, seeks

truths, and promotes justice. This is what the Jewish people have always stood for, and this is what Israel strives for today. On the other side, Hamas champions death, propagates lies, and promotes terror. Watch the coverage of the explosion at the Al Ahli Arab hospital in Gaza city. The Palestinians claimed that Israel bombed the hospital and that 500 civilians were killed in the blast. The Arab world declared days of outrage and protest against Israel. Every Western country has affirmed Israel's attestation that the blast was caused by a failed Palestinian rocket, and it turns out that the death toll is somewhere near 50. Yet the Arab world continues to blame Israel based on Hamas' lies.

There are, then, three dimensions of this *milchemes mitzvah*. The first stems from our special connection to Eretz Yisra'el. Even if no Jews were in danger, there is a *mitzvas asei*, a duty upon each Jew, to establish sovereignty in the land of Israel. The second stems from our responsibility to assist fellow Jews, regardless of where they live. *lo sa'amod al dam re'echa—ezras Yisrael m'yad tzar sheba aleihem*—applies anywhere in the world. It was equally true in Shushan, and in Eastern Europe, and in Germany during the Christian Crusades, but *al achas kama vekama*, in the land of Israel. The third stems from our responsibility to build a world worthy of existence, a moral world of *chaim* and *tov*. This last dimension, I believe, is incumbent not only on the Jewish people, but upon every decent citizen of the world.

Will Your Brothers Go out to War while You Stay Here?

I want to highlight the different ways that we can participate in this *milchemes mitzvah*. I will reiterate that there is no doubt in my mind that if ever there was an obligation upon us to participate in a

milchemes mitzvah, the time is now. Surely the worst attack against Jews of this *yovel*—perhaps the worst attack against Jews in Israel since the *churban habayis*—is a *milchemes mitzvah* of *ezras Yisrael m'yad tzar sheba aleihem*. I believe that each of the three elements I delineated constitutes a sufficient call to action, *al achas kama vekama* when all three of them—*vehorashtem es ha'aretz veyashavtem, lo sa'amod al dam re'echa*, and *uviarta hara mikirbecha*—converge on the battlefield before us.

I mentioned that I believe this obligation is incumbent upon all of Jewry. Chazal teach us that the *urim vetumim* would light up for the *Kohen Gadol*. I think you can look at *pesukim* in the Torah, and you'll find that certain *pesukim* “light up” to guide our generation. Scanning the *parshiyos* of *Bereishis* these past two weeks, I noticed that certain *pesukim* are illuminated. “Our brothers’ blood cries out from the soil” (*Bereishis* 4:20); “Shall our sisters be treated like whores?” (*Bereishis* 34:25)...

The *pasuk* that shines brightest to me now is in *parshas Matos*: “*ha'acheichem yavo'u lamilchamah va'atem tesihvu po?*” (*Bamidbar* 32:6). We, American Jewry, are like *bnei Gad*, *bnei Reuven*, and *chatzi shevet Menasheh*. Most of *Bnei Yisrael* have gone to dwell in the land of Israel. We saw the *Ever Hayarden* and chose to settle there. That is fine, for now—or more likely it is not fine for now, history will tell us—but we must remember that when *bnei Gad* and *bnei Reuven* wanted to settle *Ever Hayarden*, Moshe demanded of them: “Will your brothers go out to war while you stay here?” And the *shevatim* committed, “*lo nashuv el beiteinu ad hisnachal Bnei Yisrael ish es nachalaso*” (*Bamidbar* 32:18). This is the famous *tnai* of *bnei Gad* and *bnei Reuven*.

It is a revealing, poignant fact that most of you in this room know more about the *Choshen Mishpat din* of *tnai bnei Gad ubnei Reuven* than you know about the actual substance of the commitment. *Lo nashuv el beiteinu ad hisnachal Bnei Yisrael ish es nachalaso*. Moshe Rabbeinu warns them, “*ve'im lo sa'asun kein, hinei chatasem laHashem, ude'u chataschem asher timtza eschem*” (*Bamidbar* 32:23). The duty of *milchemes mitzvah* is incumbent upon the entire *Bnei Yisrael*. It has nothing to do with whether you live in the current borders of Israel or if you have Israeli citizenship: the call to action is *ha'acheichem yavo'u lamilchamah*, will your brothers and sisters go out to war, *va'atem tesihvu po?*

Now, as I said earlier, most of you probably could not fight for Israel if you wanted to. Of course, if you are trained and the IDF wants you, you should go. Most of you, however, are not trained to maneuver Merkava tanks, and the Israeli army would not want you. But even if we cannot participate on the front lines, we can participate in the rear. Rashi (*Devarim* 24:5) explains that even those exempt from fighting on the front lines are obligated to provide water and food to the soldiers and to help maintain the roads and fix military equipment.

The Radvaz (*Hilchos Melachim* 7:4) makes this point in a different way. He cites the Gemara in *Sotah* (ad loc.) that everyone is obligated to participate in a *milchemes mitzvah*, *afilu chasan mechedro vekallah meichupasah*. But he argues that women are not obligated to fight on the front lines because *kol kevudah bas melech penimah* (*Tehillim* 45:14)—whether women are actually exempt from serving on the front lines appears to be a debate amongst the *Rishonim*—even so, women are obligated to support the war effort from the rear by

providing food and water to the soldiers and by fixing munitions—*mesapkos mayim umazon*. Clearly there is a way to participate in the war effort from the rear. What does this mean for all of us?

Support Israel Financially

It is probably not a good use of your talents to get on a plane and wander the streets of Israel dropping off more socks and underwear for Israeli troops, or dropping off more food than soldiers can consume.

There are three things that everyone here can do to participate. One is to contribute financially. Any amount is important. There are people who have been displaced from their homes. Businesses are shut down as their workers are called up to fight. Hospitals have needs and are preparing to treat an influx of wounded soldiers. Children have been orphaned by the attacks and families have lost their primary earner. Many of the victims will require trauma support and therapy for years.

Even if you can't give much now, give something, and commit to giving more in the future. I have given my month's salary away to support needs in Israel, and I have pledged to give more. The outpouring of financial support from the American Jewish community is extraordinary, truly without limits. I'm inspired by my neighbors' and community members' financial commitment to support Israel. Some of them have been writing \$100,000 checks to institutions in Israel in need.

Support Israel Politically

There is a second way to participate. *Chazal* say that *tzedakah* is *b'mamono* but *gemilus chassadim* is *b'gufo* (Sukkah 49b). Don't just write a check, get involved personally. This is a moment of destiny for American Jewry. David French, who was deployed with the U.S. Army in Iraq, wrote in the *New York Times* that while the United States is an independent military and economic superpower, Israel is a dependent power ("What It Would Mean to Treat Hamas Like ISIS" [October 12, 2023]). This means that while the United States can wage war on its own time schedule and at the rate that it wants, Israel is ultimately a dependent power. Israel cannot fight a war without the backing of the United States, financially or geopolitically. The reasons for this are complex, and we need not get into them now. It is sufficient to appreciate French's observation that "In every major conflict since its war for independence, Israel has had to race to accomplish its military objectives before international pressure forced a cease-fire." So practically it seems that Israel will be constrained by the timetable permitted by the United States and the European Union. Already this week we have seen the influence exerted by America and Secretary Blinken over Israel's war cabinet.

This is a moment of destiny for American Jewry. We must rally the United States government to support Israel. Each of us is an equal constituent in this democracy. One person, one vote. And each of us must let our representatives in government know that we want the United States to stand by Israel, and how important it is for the U.S. to do so. This includes the United States granting Israel the time it needs to defeat Hamas, supporting Israel at the United Nations Security

Council, and providing Israel with the financial assistance and military armaments that it needs to defeat Hamas and Hezbollah, rescue the hostages, and to restore safety and security to its borders.

Perhaps the most important thing you can do in this arena is to tell your Representatives in Congress, and tell the White House, that you want them to continue to support Israel. Your voice matters. Attend rallies to show the government and the world that American Jewry supports Israel. Advocate for Israel in the court of public opinion—write an op-ed, post on your LinkedIn—so that the government understands that Americans want them to support Israel.

Whatever amount of *tzedakah* any of us will give to Israel, collectively or individually, will pale in comparison to the huge amount of financial and military aid that the United States government can and should give to Israel. Congress is drafting a bill that would provide Israel with \$15 billion in aid. This includes vital armaments for Israel's fighter jets and tanks. Ensuring that this aid package gets approved is perhaps more consequential for the war than flying to Israel to distribute stuff to soldiers or even than adding one more American *machalnik* to the front lines. The United States has also sent two aircraft carrier strike groups to the Middle East to deter Iran and Hezbollah from joining the war. Directing America, today the world's greatest superpower, of which we are equal constituents, to continue to support Israel—diplomatically, militarily, and financially—is a critical way we can participate in the war effort. It is for moments like this, I believe, that our ancestors arrived on these shores.

Support Israel in the Marketplace of Ideas

I want to mention one last area where we can make a difference. We all feel the winds of change. Pro-Hamas supporters march in Times Square, at Columbia and Harvard, in Los Angeles and Philadelphia. Antisemitism—the oldest hatred of Jews—and anti-zionism—the contemporary agenda of our adversaries to delegitimize the Jewish people’s right to national self-determination in their homeland—are now permitted by elite universities and in the halls of Congress.

We are lucky that the President of the United States is a longtime friend of Israel. But Joe Biden is an aberration in the present political order, especially amongst the new Democrats. This means that the unequivocal support that Biden is giving to Israel, both militarily and financially, is fortuitous *hashgacha*. He ran to Israel’s aid without batting an eyelash. It is not clear that this type of support will exist in thirty or forty years. This will depend on the underlying values and ideas that animate Western society, on the *zeitgeist* and *weltanschauung* of the West.

We see this shift occurring on college campuses, we see antisemitism gaining a stronger foothold in New York City, in the United States, and in Congress. The rise in antisemitism and the decline in support for Israel move in lockstep with the shifting values of Western society. Some of this has to do with ideologies of power structures: oppressor/oppressed, colonial/indigenous, minority/majority, occupation/resistance. The marketplace of ideas today is such that ordinary Americans now openly support Hamas’s violence and brutality—the intentional murder of innocent Israelis, the

rape of Jewish women, and the burning of Jewish infants. The moral confusion is so dense—the fog so thick—that these people cannot discern between good and evil.

When I look at my peers on college campuses, at Penn, at Columbia, when I listen to world leaders, it seems that they are unable to distinguish between *or* and *choshech*. It boggles the mind. Many universities are more than happy to condemn Israel in the same breath that they condemn Hamas.

Three times a day we declare in our *tefillos*—“*ata chonen le’adam da’as, umelamed le’enosh bina*”—that *Hashem* grants mankind knowledge. Chazal teach that knowledge manifests in the power of discernment, in the ability to distinguish. In the *havdalah* of *Shemoneh Esrei*, in “*ata chonen le’adam da’as*”, we say “*hamavdil bein kodesh lechol, bein or lechoshech, bein Yisrael la’amim.*” Knowledge and understanding lies in the power to discern, between light and dark, between *kodesh* and *chol*, between good and evil. One of the first *berachos* we make in the morning is *hanosein lasechvi v’nah lehavchin bein yom uvein laylah*—He gives the heart the knowledge to distinguish between day and night. In the very beginning of *Bereishis* (c.f. 1:4), we read, “*vayavdel Elokim bein ha’or uvein hachoshech; vayar Elokim es ha’or ki tov.*” That is the power to distinguish between *tohu vavohu vechoshech al p’nei tehom*, and *or* and *tov*, good and right.

I think many people, even within the Jewish community, are sometimes persuaded by counter-narratives that seek to blur the distinction between *tov* and *ra*.

It is our responsibility, in the sense of *lehavdil bein ha'or uvein hachoshech*, to clarify, defend, and reinforce the principles of justice and right that lie at the center of our moral worldview, and to make sure that these ideas take hold and resonate in the marketplace of ideas. We should make the best case for Israel before the international community and to our fellow Americans.

I think that is an important front in the present war, and all of you can be involved in it. *Lo bashamayim hi*. One member of my community, J.J. Kimche, wrote an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal criticizing Harvard's response to the attacks and its refusal to support its Jewish students ("Harvard Shrugs at Jew-Hatred" (October 10, 2023). All of you can be involved in similar projects. It is really not a difficult thing to do; it is *beficha uvil'avcha la'asoso*. If you have an internship, or a job, and your employer or colleagues are indifferent to the ascendant antisemitism or anti-Zionism, you should speak up. It is your responsibility to serve as an agent of moral clarity.

It is not just Jews who are obligated to do this; it is incumbent on every person endowed with the dignity of humanity. If you are following the backlash against America's elite universities, you'll notice that it is not just Torah observant Jews who are declaring "I will no longer support universities that are unable to condemn Hamas as evil." It is also non-Jews, like the Huntsman family. Jon Huntsman Jr., who served as a U.S. ambassador under both Democratic and Republican presidents, wrote this to Penn:

"Penn has become deeply adrift in ways that make it almost unrecognizable. Moral relativism has fueled the university's race to the

bottom.... The University's silence in the face of reprehensible and historic Hamas evil against the people of Israel (when the only response should be outright condemnation) is a new low. Silence is antisemitism, and antisemitism is hate, the very thing higher ed was built to obviate. Consequently, Huntsman Foundation will close its checkbook on all future giving to Penn.”

If these institutions of higher learning are unable to distinguish between good and evil, they are complicit in propagating a world of *bishchis kol basar es darko al ha'aretz*. It is our responsibility to correct the marketplace of ideas, to reinforce and advance the immutable moral principles that lie at the heart of our worldview.

I do not recall if I mentioned this to my *shiur*, but I believe that each time we do not defend our principles, or speak up to support Israel's right to exist, or its right to defend itself, in the communities that we circulate within, we normalize antisemitism and the anti-Israel ideology that has become more entrenched and permitted in the United States.

Years ago, when I graduated from Yeshiva University and began my philosophy studies at Columbia, I was sitting in class and the professor began discussing the problem of evil. She said, “most of us don't encounter evil face to face, but there are Palestinians languishing in Israeli prisons who suffer every day from the evil perpetrated against them.” I was so caught off guard. I was not expecting it. I didn't know what to say. Was I supposed to defend Israel here, in a classroom full of philosophy students at Columbia? Should I stand up and protest and declare that it was a despicable thing for her to say? Should I shut my

laptop and walk out? I did not. I sat there; I was wearing a *yarmulka*, and she got away with saying it.

And when I look back to that moment, I believe I violated the prohibition, which the Rambam codifies (*Devarim 20:3; Hilchos Melachim 7:15*), of *al yerach levavchem*. In *milchamah*, it is *assur* to be intimidated, to be afraid. The Rambam says that someone who is afraid, and does not have the courage to fight, or in this case to speak up, *kol demei Yisrael teluyim betzavaro*—the blood of all of Jewry is on his neck. When we don't have the courage to speak up, when we fail, we permit and normalize, little by little, this type of rhetoric and allow it to take root. We allow the world to congregate against *acheinu Bnei Yisrael*. The result is that at critical moments, like now, the world will not support Israel. This is why in each instance *kol demei Yisrael teluyim betzavaro*. The Rambam says, “*ve'im lo asah milchamah b'chol libo u'vechol nafsho, harei zeh k'mi sheshafach demei hakol.*” Each time you consider whether to speak up, know that the fate of Jewry hangs on your neck.

I want to conclude with the following two thoughts. I believe this mindset of being involved in the *milchemes mitzvah* is so important, that if I were the Chief Rabbi of the United States, I would make a *takanah* that we should all wear Israel's olive-green fatigues so long as the *milchamah* is being waged, just like Volodymyr Zelensky wears Ukraine's fatigues when he represents them overseas, to show that they are a nation at war. That is the mindset of *milchemes mitzvah*, the condition of Jewry right now.

For the last couple of weeks, most of us have had nothing but

tears. When I sit alone in my study, and my mind's eye is drawn, inevitably, to the hostages held underground, to the terror of the victims murdered on October 7th, to the trauma of the survivors, to the young soldiers who will die defending Israel, to the forces of darkness that gather in Lebanon and Iran—when I consider the difficult path ahead and my eyes tear—I am somewhat consoled by the words of Tehillim (126:5), “*hazor'im bedim'ah berinah yiktzoru.*” That which we sow in tears, we will harvest in joy. The last few weeks have been *zor'im bedim'ah*. And as darkness looms on the horizon, we will continue to be *zor'im bedim'ah*. But soon, hopefully soon, we will witness *berinah yiktzoru*. That which we invest with our tears and with our blood, we will harvest in joy.

My grandmother, whom I mentioned earlier—whose town was destroyed by the Nazis, whose mother was murdered by the Poles, and whose father was taken from her by the Soviets—wrote about the dignity and triumph of the human spirit even in the darkest moments of the sho'ah. I have two copies of her book, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, each with an inscription from her. In one, she inscribed, “*me'at or mehachosbech bagadol*”—a little light from the vast darkness. In the second, she inscribed, “*me'at or docheh harbech chosbech*”—not just “a little light from the vast darkness,” but “a little light has the power to dispel great darkness.” That is what we are fighting for right now. We pray, every morning, *or chadash al tzion ta'ir, venizkeh kulanu b'meheirah le'oro*. May we merit to win this war—*ki Hashem Elokeichem holeich imachem lehilacheim lachem*—and build a civilization whose radiant light dispels the darkness, *or chadash al tzion ta'ir venizkeh kulanu b'meheirah le'oro*.