



SERMON VAYISHLACH:ⁱ CEASEFIRE NOW

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 2 December 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

1 When I go into schools to talk to the children about Judaism, there's a graphic I use to show just how few Jews there are in the UK. The graphic shows 200 people's silhouettes, 199 of them black, one of them red. Only 1 in 200 people in this country are Jewish. That's a tiny number!

2 Or is it? Because this week, the number of Gazans killed in the current bout of violence passed 11,000, which means that 1 in 200 Gazans has been killed.ⁱⁱ 1 in 200. That's an enormous number!

3 In our Torah service this morning, we heard both ends of the history of ancient Israel: the land being promised to Jacob and his descendants,ⁱⁱⁱ and, in our haftarah, its lament by the generation of the exile when they found themselves captive in Babylon.^{iv}

4 There was great joy at the end of last month when some modern-day Israeli captives were returned to their families and loved ones in Israel. Similarly, there was great joy amongst Gazans when they were granted a four-day reprieve from bombardment.

5 Both of those joys need to be continued and extended. When it comes to the hostages, they must all be returned, immediately and without precondition. That is uncontroversial. They are innocent human beings, and there is no excuse whatsoever that can justify their continued captivity.

ⁱ Genesis 35:6-21

ⁱⁱ Rabea Eghbariah, "The *Harvard Law Review* refused to run this piece about genocide in Gaza", *The Nation* (21 November 2023): <<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/harvard-law-review-gaza-israel-genocide/>>

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 35:12

^{iv} Psalm 137

6 The other joy, the temporary ceasefire, needs to be extended as well. That is controversial. There are serious people, people I respect, who oppose a ceasefire. But I think that, on this, they are dangerously wrong.

7 Liz Saville-Roberts MP, who is vice-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism, put it best:^v

[A] pause as opposed to a ceasefire presumes and makes accommodation for the resumption of violence, which means more children dying, more homes destroyed, and more lives ruined. A pause is a tacit endorsement of the position that more bombs and bullets are the answer to this crisis. Rather, we should be reaching for a political solution using diplomacy and dialogue. That can happen only with a full and immediate ceasefire. Not only would this stop needless deaths of Palestinians, but it would of course allow for the safe release of the hostages captured by Hamas.

The fighting simply has to stop, and it has to stop now.

8 Of course, Hamas is an enemy, an evil enemy, and every day they continue to rule over Gaza is an affront to human decency and a danger to our friends and family in Israel. But, like last time and the time before that and the time before that, it may not be possible to vanquish them without disproportionate consequences. And the death of 1 in 200 Gazans – as a proportion, equivalent to the death of the entire Jewish population of the United Kingdom – is a paradigmatic example of a disproportionate consequence.

9 Another consequence of continued fighting, much less severe than deaths but no less significant, is the moral consequence on the State of Israel. Israel is a holy land, infused with the Torah's teachings of peace and the sanctity of life. The level of destruction we are currently witnessing is inconsistent with that status.

10 In 1919 and 1920, parts of the Zionist movement campaigned at the Paris Peace Conference for the establishment of a Jewish state in the land of Israel. The First World War was over, the great powers were redrawing their maps, and it seemed like a prime

^v HC Deb, 15 November 2023 c 740



opportunity for a little corner of Jewish-controlled land to be pencilled in.^{vi}

11 Aharon Shmu'el Tamaret, an Orthodox rabbi in Poland, was appalled at this, seeing it as an attempt by world Jewry to capitalise on the bloodshed of the war. In an essay, he said:^{vii}

An important question arises from the point of view of Torah: is it proper for us to read Torah in a 'national home' that emerged from the flow of blood that flooded our world? After all, the Torah tells us, "*You shall not consume blood*"^{viii} ... Granted, we are not the ones who spilled the blood, but our spiritual teachings ... do not allow us to enjoy even the fruit of a tree planted over a grave.^{ix} Of course, we cannot answer our question with an outright 'no', or a ban, because in [the land of Israel] our people would find much spiritual healing – and for the purposes of healing ... even the fruits of a grave-tree are permitted. But to consume these fruits with joy is utterly abominable. In fact, one who sings while eating cemetery-fruits exposes themselves as one who believes it is permissible to fill a cemetery [with corpses] in order to grow [good] fruit there.

This is an incredibly powerful passage, and its dismissal of the concept of fault speaks to me deeply. It matters not whose fault it is that blood is being shed. The fact is, blood has been shed, and there is something, at a bare minimum, distasteful, about reading from the Torah in a land saturated with it.

12 Views on who bears responsibility for the current bloodshed in Gaza are sharply divided. Is it Hamas, for inexcusably attacking a sovereign state and using human shields? Is it the IDF, for – in the words of its spokesperson Daniel Hagari – placing their "*emphasis on damage and not on accuracy*"?^x Is it Qatar for sheltering terrorist masterminds? Is it America for providing armaments? Is it Iran for its terrifying nuclear programme, which hangs, ever-present and ever-threatening, over Israel? Or, indeed, does blame lie at the

^{vi} See eg David A Andelman, *A Shattered Peace: Versailles 1919 and the price we pay today* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2008): 84-111.

^{vii} Aharon Shmu'el Tamaret, "Al Hit-chayut" (1922), reprinted in Isaac Slater (ed), *Tohu va-Vohu: chameish masot* (Jersualem: Blima Books, 2022), 49-64: 61.

^{viii} Leviticus 19:26

^{ix} A slight gloss on Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 368:2

^x James Rothwell, "Israel abandons precision bombing in favour of 'damage and destruction'", *The Telegraph* (11 October 2023): <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/10/11/israel-abandon-precision-bombing-eliminate-hamas-officials/>>



door of the great powers who, at the Paris Peace Conference, failed to build a fair and just Middle East when they had the chance?

13 It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter who is responsible. Either way, the land is now soaked in blood, and such a land is unfit for Torah.

14 When we read from Psalm 137 this morning, we asked ourselves: "*How can we sing a song of the Eternal One on the soil of a strange land?*"^{xi} (That verse was based on a song by Boney M.)

15 A 19th-century commentator called the Malbim explained the concept of a strange land: "*The song of the Eternal One is a song of the Divine Presence, of the appearance of God, of prophecy ... of Torah, of worship, of miracles. How can we sing such a song in a land unprepared for these spiritual values?*"^{xii}

16 I really, deeply fear that Israel itself is rapidly falling into that category. How can our people sing our beautiful song of prophecy, of Torah, of miracles, in a land built on bombs and bullets?

17 In recent weeks, we've heard the phrase 'existential threat' an awful lot. World Jewry faces an existential threat. British Jews face an existential threat. Israel faces an existential threat. I think that Israel does face an existential threat. In fact, two. There is the ever-present threat of violent destruction by earthly enemies. There is also an increasing threat of self-destruction by moral corrosion.

18 I pray for a lasting ceasefire. A ceasefire that will enable the safe and swift return of the surviving hostages, so that they can rebuild their lives. A ceasefire that will allow the surviving Gazans to rebuild their lives. A ceasefire that will help to rebuild Israel's status as a light unto the nations and a beacon of Torah values. Then, and only then, the descendants of Jacob will be able not just to live, fearfully, in the land they were promised, but to enjoy it. בן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

^{xi} Psalm 137:4

^{xii} Malbim *ad loc*

