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Hashem's Plan

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Mother

often said in my youth, "We make plans, and G-d laughs."
She spoke divine truth.

I
remember her soft, radiant smile a lifetime ago—
a quiet rhapsody of overflowing love and
revelations, opening our souls with joy and
wisdom, illuminating the hidden universe of
Hashem.

Gazing
across space-time, I see her face, blessed with a
numinous presence, evoking the beauty and
magnificence of the sacred universe. I envision

monarch butterflies—adorned in orange, black,
and white—soaring high into the heavens
on a long journey of rebirth.

Blessed
with a vast, sweeping soul of kindness and
compassion,
she was the spiritual cynosure of the family. Our
home
was a holy omphalos. Relatives and friends often
visited
us to spend time with her.

But
Mother, a little woman of majesty and vision,
suffered
immensely, her fragile body beset with harrowing
heart disease, always threatening her being and
stealing
Hashem's *cosmic breath*. A bestial Shadow of
Death

entered our home, encircling Mother.

Still,
she did not cease to believe in Hashem, for she possessed an unalloyed faith, a pure efflorescence perched in her soul—a sphere of celestial light nestled in the invisible universe within, with hidden sparks of divinity coming forth from her gentle being.

I watched Mother die in her room sixty years ago, an oxygen tank, like a loyal soldier standing guard or an angel blessing her, on the night table by her bed.

Mother lay in bed. Her gold eyes looked up lovingly at me, and then blankly, gazing into the nowhere of the other world.

Mother died yesterday, for time is a gorgeous mustang, galloping around in a circle and vanishing into the *Without End*.

Mother died at fifty—too soon for a young man of twenty, crushed by overwhelming loss and grief. I could not fathom Hashem’s Plan for me.

Rushing slowly through chimerical time and lost, lacerated decades,

I sometimes imagine, in a prophetic dream, my *neshamah* dancing in phantasmagoria, or in the starless, moonless, blackness—a vision of Hashem’s Plan—an evanescent glimpse vanishing in the invisible universe.

Hashem’s Plan is unfathomable, I believe. But still, after Mother’s death and my unbearable grief, Hashem empowered me to transcend ineffable pain, and honor Mother’s memory by becoming who I was meant to be—a Jewish psychologist helping others, emotional/spiritual sufferers on an inner journey of healing.

Mother died at fifty, too soon. But she lives in me; her everlasting love, a cornucopia of blessings, feeds my being.

Mother often said in my youth, “We make plans, and G-d laughs.” She spoke divine truth.

The Endless Cruelty of War

Zachary Truboff is the Director of the International Beit Din Institute for Agunah Research.

Not long after October 7, my son’s school in Jerusalem hung a banner near its entrance that read *Am Yisrael Hai*—“The People of Israel Lives.” It was one of many placed around the city, meant to lift spirits and declare that, despite everything, the Jewish people endure. But a few months after it went up, I noticed that someone had scrawled two additional words on it in marker: *al harbo*, so that the banner now read “The People of Israel Lives by Its Sword.”

I don’t know who wrote these words, but they have stayed with me ever since. What exactly did they mean? That we are strong, unyielding, ready to do whatever it takes? That we no longer pretend to seek peace, but embrace the sword as our fate? Did the person who wrote it know that living by the sword is the way of Esau and his descendants, those who embraced violence and bloodshed? For the Jewish people, it has never been a blessing; it has always felt more like a curse.

Now, more than a year and a half since the war in Gaza began, it is clear that what started as a

military response to unspeakable violence has evolved into something much harder to name. What started with a war against Hamas in Gaza rapidly became a war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, eventually leading to a twelve-day war against Iran. With that last conflict now seemingly over, attention has returned once again to Gaza, where fighting resumed four months ago.

This is now Israel’s longest war. Even after nearly all leaders of Hamas have been killed, the bombing continues, including in crowded areas where civilians seek shelter. Food is slowly being allowed into Gaza, but civilians are regularly killed by Israel’s military when trying to access it.¹ The images that have emerged of life there today are painfully difficult to see. But perhaps what is most unsettling is how many choose not to look at all.

As the war has continued, a numbness has crept in, especially here in Israel. It is easy to get behind cries of “total victory.” It is much harder to talk about what war does to a people over time: the slow erosion of moral clarity, the dulling of compassion, the way the suffering of others begins to feel distant or even deserved. While there has been fierce debate over the past year and a half about the goals and strategies of the war, far too little energy has been spent grappling with its moral and spiritual cost for the Jewish

¹ [“Army says it has learned lessons after repeatedly opening fire on Gazans en route to aid centers,” *The Times of Israel* \(July 11, 2025\).](#)

people.

War and the Creation of Cruelty

If we wish to understand what war does to the soul, we must listen to the judgment God rendered upon David, Israel's greatest king and warrior: "You have shed much blood and waged great wars; you shall not build a house for My name, because you have shed much blood before Me on the earth."² Rambam explains that David was disqualified from building the Temple not due to sin, but due to something perhaps even more troubling. David had fought righteous wars. He battled idolaters. He defended his people. He showed compassion to the weak. But the act of killing left its mark on him. It shaped him. It brought about within him what Rambam calls the *middah* of *akhzariyut*—the attribute of cruelty.³

Not sadism or malice, as there is little evidence that David acted in those ways.⁴ Rather, the cruelty was something deeper and more structural: a necessary desensitization to the image of God in the human other, without which one cannot survive the battlefield. The Hebrew word for cruelty (*akhzariyut*) itself conceals this truth: *ah zar*, "my brother is a stranger to me."⁵

² [Divrei Ha-Yamim I 22:8](#).

³ [Shemoneh Perakim 7](#).

⁴ That said, [Radak \(on Divrei Ha-Yamim I 22:8\)](#) explains that God's rejection of David as the builder of the Temple due to his bloodshed refers to his role in sending Uriah to his death to cover up the affair with Batsheva, as well as to the possibility that he killed innocents in wars meant to crush the enemy.

Cruelty alienates us from seeing the other as bearing the divine image. And that is why it is incompatible with building a home for the divine presence in this world.

Rambam was not alone in recognizing this danger. Netziv saw it too. In the case of the *ir ha-nidahat*, a city of Jews in the Land of Israel that has given itself over to idolatry, the Torah commands that its inhabitants are to be killed, and the city is to be obliterated by fire. Yet, immediately after this act of divine justice, the Torah promises: "And God will return from His fierce anger and give you compassion, and be compassionate to you."⁶ Why must God give compassion, Netziv asks, after the fulfillment of this commandment? Because the act of killing, especially mass killing, always leaves an impact. "One who kills," he writes, "becomes cruel by nature," even when the killing is righteous and the violence is justified.⁷

In the case of the *ir ha-nidahat*, it is not just a few select agents of the court who carry out justice, but rather, a significant portion of society that is deputized to become instruments of death, not unlike in war. The Torah's promise of restored compassion, of the heart being re-softened, is

⁵ This interpretation is, of course, a pronunciatory *derashah*, as it requires swapping the *khaf* in *akhzariyut* with a *het*, so *ah zar* can be heard aloud as "my brother is a stranger."

⁶ [Devarim 13:18](#).

⁷ [Ha'ameik Davar](#) to [Devarim 13:18](#), s.v. "ve-natan lekha rahamim."

offered as a form of healing. But the very need for such healing underscores a deeper truth: even a just war brutalizes the spirit.

For decades, Israel has held up its moral restraint as proof of its righteousness. It has long claimed the IDF is the most moral army in the world. That it strikes with precision. That it warns civilians. That it always makes great efforts to protect innocent lives. But even if that is all true, this too must be said: even the most righteous soldiers are undone by war. The Torah makes this clear with its disturbing allowance for the forcible taking and bedding of a *yefat to'ar*, a beautiful captive woman, in wartime.⁸ The rabbis do not, God forbid, see this as an ethical practice, but as a concession to the *yeitzer ha-ra*.⁹ War awakens dark passions, and those passions can have terrible consequences.

As R. Elazar Shach points out, this commandment applies even to the best of us.¹⁰ Before battle, the *kohen mashuah milhamah*, the priest anointed for war, announces that anyone who is fearful and faint-hearted should return home. The rabbis explain that those who remain to fight are wholly righteous, free even of minor transgressions. And yet these are the very men who might succumb to temptation and commit great moral violations in

the chaos of war. If even the most righteous can be corrupted, what does that reveal about the nature of war? That it undoes restraint. That it awakens the *yeitzer ha-ra*, even in those who are good. That it can bring even the most disciplined souls to the brink of collapse. As R. Shach explains it:

War, by its very nature, strips man of the image of God. A person loses their moral judgment and begins to act in ways they would never consider in times of peace. In war, the value of life is diminished.¹¹

This would be bad enough on its own, but R. Shach identifies how the destructive force of war always spreads outward and into the very atmosphere. Drawing on the Torah's [description](#) of the generation of Noah, "*vatishaheit ha-aretz*, "the earth became corrupt," he explains that war unleashes a force of *tum'ah*, a spiritual contamination that descends upon the world. Even animals, he notes, became corrupted in the generation of the flood, not because they sinned, but because they were affected by the cruelty of humanity. The same, he explains, applies in our time.¹² We think we can wall off the battlefield from the home front. We think soldiers alone bear

⁸ [Devarim 21:11](#).

⁹ [Kiddushin 21b](#). The Torah does not command Israelite soldiers to refrain from this behavior - it instead provides rules for proceeding afterwards, seemingly meant to counterbalance, or mitigate the consequences of, the soldier's act.

¹⁰ R. Elazar Shach, *Be-Zot Ani Boteiah*, Chapter 17, 45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, Chapter 10, 24-25.

the burden. But cruelty crosses every line. It spreads throughout every corner of society, seeping into politics, media, and even religious language.

Since October 7, Israeli public discourse has become saturated with calls for vengeance, and even the world of children has not been spared. Weeks into the war, my son came home from school with a poem. It was written by someone living near Gaza and was an attempt to give voice to the trauma they had experienced. But the poem's grief quickly turned to rage, going so far as to call for revenge by rewriting a verse from Song of Songs. Where it had once read *azzah ka-mavet*, "strong as death,"¹³ the poem instead declared: *mavet le-Azah*, "Death to Gaza."

At another son's school, when the sirens sounded and the students ran to the bomb shelter, they chanted a different refrain: "May your village burn." Some might dismiss this as childish bravado, until one remembers that, in the West Bank, settler violence has surged. Villages have been set ablaze, night after night. These acts are justified in the name of defense, but it is hard to view them as anything other than malicious and criminal. When I raised this concern with the teacher and suggested students recite *Tehillim* instead, as surely there is no more appropriate Jewish response in a bomb shelter, he looked at

me blankly. He said he had not heard the chants and that he'd take it under advisement.

Cruelty as a National Ideology in Times of War

R. Shach taught that war's cruelty does not remain confined to individuals, and that when a nation fully embraces war, that cruelty becomes systemic. Even without illustrations from the Torah, this conclusion should not surprise us. Carl von Clausewitz, the renowned German theorist of warfare, wrote that war depends on three elements: chance, political purpose, and the enmity of the people.¹⁴ The first two are, in some ways, familiar. War is always unpredictable; its outcomes can never be known in advance. And war should never be fought blindly, only directed toward concrete political ends.

But the third element is often overlooked. For war to be sustained and ultimately won, it must be fought not only with guns and tanks, but also with hatred of the enemy. Without enmity, the war effort would soon collapse, for it is what animates soldiers to fight and civilians to sacrifice. Put differently, hating the enemy is not an unfortunate byproduct of war—it is the very condition of war's possibility. War demands stories of righteousness and evil; it requires seeing the other side not as human beings, but as monsters whose deaths are justified, perhaps even redemptive. And as Clausewitz knew, that hatred must be cultivated,

¹³ [Shir Ha-Shirim 8:6](#).

¹⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, [On War](#) (Oxford University Press: 2007), 30-31; 86.

amplified, and absorbed by the public for war to continue.

This insight is especially relevant for democracies, where public opinion can constrain or enable the state's capacity to fight. In Israel, where soldiers are drawn from civilian reserves, popular support for war is even more essential. The battlefield may be limited to Gaza, but all of society is called upon to help fight by promoting emotions such as fear, anger, moral righteousness, and a desire for revenge. One finds this in the language of politicians, in the media's framing, in the sermons of rabbis, and in a society's songs and prayers. As R. Shach warned, the poison does not stay on the blade. It spreads through the bloodstream of a people.

Most crucially, sustaining enmity requires a form of structural ignorance that can only be described as cruelty. It depends on relentless exposure to the enemy's violence alongside active repression of mindfulness of one's own. The media plays a central role in this dynamic and is quickly drafted into the war effort, sometimes as a willing participant, sometimes under duress. To ensure continued support from the public, video of innocents burned alive in airstrikes, or images of starving babies in hospitals, must not make it on the daily news. And if they are shown, they must be dismissed as fakes or enemy propaganda.

For me, this dynamic became disturbingly clear several months ago at a conference that brought together Israelis from across the political spectrum to reflect on the war. One session featured a panel of leading Israeli journalists asking whether the public was being adequately informed about the true horrors of the war in Gaza. To my surprise, the panelists began with a blunt admission: the answer was no. The public had been shielded from the worst images, the most horrifying testimonies. But instead of acknowledging this as a journalistic failure, most panelists deflected blame onto the public. The media, they insisted, is beholden to economic pressures. It can only show the people what they are willing to see. And if Israelis do not want to see the suffering of Palestinians, then they will not.¹⁵

When War Becomes a *Mitzvah*

Our hatred for the enemy, combined with our inability to acknowledge the suffering of the innocent on the other side, can easily blind us. Nearly a century ago, in the shadow of World War I, R. Moshe Avigdor Amiel looked upon a broken world—millions dead, entire nations in ruin—and struggled to understand how such horrors had been made possible. Even worse, how could so many have cheered it on? The only way he could make sense of it was by describing the masses of soldiers and the civilians who supported them as hypnotized. They truly believed they were acting

¹⁵ This remains true, as a recent article makes clear. See Ido David Cohen, "[64% of Israelis See No Need for More Reporting on Gazans' Sufferings, Haaretz \(June 10, 2025\)](#)."

righteously, fulfilling a divine command no matter the cost in blood. If a soldier was asked,

Why did you kill a man and spill innocent blood for no reason? He will reply, without hesitation, that you are falsely accusing the innocent—God forbid! He is not a murderer or a thief. He acted entirely within the law and by right, because the slain man was, in his eyes, a mortal enemy who lay in wait to kill him. He was merely fulfilling the commandment: “If someone comes to kill you, rise early to kill him first.”¹⁶

And if someone dare ask what could possibly draw masses of men into such devastation, R. Amiel suggests their answer would echo with religious certainty:

Why did you abandon your homes, your families, your livelihoods—everything you loved and held dear—to enter fields of slaughter and turn the world into blood... Surely we would have heard the familiar answer: that they were fighting a commanded war (a *milhemet mitzvah*), and that this

mitzvah was the greatest of all *mitzvot* in the world.¹⁷

We often assume that war is a moment of heightened moral clarity—when the dividing line between good and evil becomes obvious. But R. Amiel understood that when war becomes a *mitzvah*, it also risks becoming most immoral. Once the enemy is seen as wholly evil, morality no longer restrains violence, but rather sanctifies it. The most horrific acts can become permissible, even obligatory, as in the biblical commandment to wipe out Amalek even down to the last child. This is the terrifying secret of war: that it can wear the mask of righteousness. That it can speak in the language of God even while desecrating His image.

This is why Clausewitz warns, “War is politics by other means.” Despite what propaganda may claim, wars are always fought between parties with competing interests and must therefore be waged according to rational and publicly justifiable goals. War is not a morality play—and when it becomes one, the result is often cruelty disguised as justice. When war is viewed as a *mitzvah*—as commanded and necessary—it is removed from the realm of politics and human judgment. Under such conditions, it easily becomes an end unto itself. We fight not because we know what we are fighting for, but because we can no longer imagine any alternative.

¹⁶ *Derashot El Ami* 1:8. The quote cited at the end is found on [Sanhedrin 72a](#) and in numerous other places throughout *midrash* literature.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Of course, no one who supports the current war ever admits this. Instead, they rally behind slogans like “Together We Will Win” and proclaim lofty goals that bear little connection to reality. When pressed to define those goals more concretely, the stated goals seem to shift by the week. First it was “eliminate Hamas.” Then “secure the Philadelphi Corridor.” Then “achieve security control over Gaza.” More recently, talk has turned to urging refugees’ “voluntary emigration,” a euphemism for forced removal of the Palestinian population.¹⁸ Each new slogan offers the illusion of direction, while evading the question that refuses to disappear: What comes next, and who will bear its cost?

Perhaps the clearest sign that a war has lost its way is when no one knows how it will end. This is the deepest indictment of the war in Gaza. From the outset, there has been no serious or coherent plan for “the day after.” And without a vision for what it means to replace Hamas—the most basic of all political questions—the war cannot end. And if it cannot end, then the killing continues. Cruelty becomes indistinguishable from necessity.¹⁹

War’s Final Cruelty

When faced with all this, some will still say: “Yes, this war has been hard, and innocents have

suffered—but Hamas is to blame. They perpetrated the horrors of October 7, they hide among civilians, they refuse to free the hostages, they bring ruin on their own people.” When asked directly, such people rarely hesitate and claim even the deaths of thousands of children in this war are justified: tragic, yes, but still necessary. Evil must not be allowed to prevail.

Perhaps. But what if something else is true?

I often wonder how David responded when God told him he could not build the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* because of the blood he had shed. Did he recognize that waging war, even justly, even righteously, had taken a toll on his soul? That the act of killing, repeated again and again, had dulled his capacity to see the divine image in others?

It’s possible. But there is another, more haunting possibility, one that speaks deeply to our moment. What if, when David heard God’s judgment, he felt only burning anger? After all, had he not done what was required, what was necessary? War is the way of the world, and he had fought on the side of good, for God and the Jewish people, against cruel and merciless enemies who had threatened Israel. Hadn’t he done everything right?

¹⁸See Lazar Berman and Nava Freiberg, “[Netanyahu sets implementation of Trump’s Gaza relocation plan as new condition for ending war](#),” *The Times of Israel* (May 22, 2025).

¹⁹ In another recent survey, 47 percent of Israeli Jews answered yes to the question: “Do you support the claim

that the [Israeli army] in conquering an enemy city, should act in a manner similar to the way the Israelites did when they conquered Jericho under the leadership of Joshua, ie to kill all its inhabitants?” See Nadav Rapaport, “[Nearly half of Israelis support army killing all Palestinians in Gaza, poll finds](#),” *Middle East Eye* (May 24, 2025).

Maybe David believed he had done nothing wrong, and that is war's final cruelty. That we can be so transformed by it that we can no longer recognize what we have become.

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