LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Noah

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing articles that were previously scheduled. In this way, we hope to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

Noah and the Trauma of Heroic Destiny

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Heroes who did the impossible,
Dreamers who lived the dream.
— *Harriet Monroe*, "Heroes of Peace"

What are a hero's limits? From the myths of ancient Greeks to the headlines of global pages, we learn about herculean individuals armed with bravery, vision, and will. Even the term "herculean" was born from the mythological Roman hero, Hercules, a mortal more powerful than any man (and even some gods). We position heroes as divine beings in their own right, divorced from human travails. Their troubles live on different planes than the universal mundanity of the human experience. Effectively, their work is effortless.

Noah would appear to be one such hero.

Corruption, oppression, and injustice take hold of a once "very good" existence, the Torah records, leading up to *Parashat Noah* (Bereishit 1:31; 6:5-7). Now, creation forsakes its Creator with harmonic ease, and God hopes to buttress its last basis for survival. But as the world proves itself beyond salvageability, destruction emerges on the horizon like the morning sun—slow, steady, and with a haunting anticipation. God, the Creator with His pencil in hand, sees no alternative but to erase His work and start anew. He sets His sights on Noah to be humankind's hero and sketches a path forward: Noah will be God's partner in etching a new human

form, a new mode of being, into the world. God's dream can live on.

The story unfolds as such. Noah builds a boat at God's behest, the flooding waters rampage across the land, and the history pages are torn asunder. On this other side, Noah emerges as God's new first human being.

We learn a great deal about the world in which Noah lives, but nothing about the world that lives within Noah. I aim to explore the latter. His emotional turbulence and mental resilience are instead encoded, ever so quietly, in the spaces of the text. But on the surface, he remains nearly unscathed—a victorious and whole hero.

We now embark to trace the footprints of Noah's inner trek, to understand, perhaps, the traumatic effects of heroic destiny, the unspoken secrets of valor, and how it shades Noah's story with the vivid colors of a real, human experience.

I. Destined to Save

"And Lemekh lived 182 years, and he birthed a son. And he called his name 'Noah,' saying, 'This one will *yenahameinu* from our actions and from our hands' distress from the land that YHVH cursed'" (Bereishit 5:28-29).

In his infancy, Noah is already assigned a destiny: the one who will *yenahameinu.* The word's root, *n-h-m*, is perhaps most recognizable from the context of *nihum aveilim*, comforting or consoling mourners. To understand a word's essence, though, the root must be seen in its most original, inclusive form. Malbim says *n-h-m* is about changing spirits, attitudes, thoughts—altering the state of what is into the vision of what should be.[1] Noah's destiny is to be the changemaker, the hope-giver. In Lemekh's eyes, that change is in agricultural toil at painstaking exertion. Noah, to his father, will offer an industrialization of sorts to alleviate the earth's painstaking toll. But still, the Torah hints at a larger purpose looming in the background.

Rashi, wondering why the text identifies Noah as "*ben*" [son] before revealing his name, quotes an explanation in *Midrash Rabbah* that "*ben*" alludes to the word *nivneh*, meaning "is built," as in, "that from him, the world is built."[2] Builder, changemaker, hope-harbinger, Noah is situated in the spotlight of greatness, or more correctly, heroic greatness. "Meritorious are the righteous," the *Zohar* comments, "who are imprinted with the mark of the King's ring, for they are marked with His name."[3] God's signet, as it were, is etched into Noah's selfhood.

Destiny claims Noah mere moments into his life. He is snatched from the bliss of mediocrity, the ease of being ordinary, and thrown into brewing turmoil. Yet, at this point, the Torah mentions not an explicit word of impending doom. Noah's

[1] Malbim to Bereishit 5:29, s.v. "vayikra et shemo Noah leimor, zeh yenahameinu."

[2] Rashi to Bereishit 5:28, s.v. "vayoled bein."

[3] *Zohar*, Noah 2:16.

introduction appears in the accounting of lineage. Were the story to end here, there would be no challenging questions. A few verses later, we are told that Noah lives 500 years and bore three sons—Shem, Ham, and Yefet. Still, no suspicion of problems is evident.

As humankind multiplies and reproduces, populating the earth with exceptional success, we are told of trouble's emergence: *Benei ha-elokim* saw the human women and ogled after their beauty, and "they took women from whomever they chose" (Bereishit 6:2). There is dispute as to whether *benei ha-elokim* refers to divine beings (as "*Elokim*" can sometimes refer) or to powerful human leaders (as "*elokim*" can also refer). Baked within the confusion is the consensus that the mighty—entrusted to administer justice and uphold righteousness—subjugated the vulnerable to their desires. Ramban contends that they openly practiced injustice, abducting married women for themselves. There were no formal authorities to oversee the *benei ha-elokim* and enforce accountability.[4]

In his distress, God sets a 120-year term for rectification, a divine timer stifling His justification of hope. "I cannot forever grapple" with choosing "whether to destroy or to have mercy," Rashi reads as God's apparent distress.[5] Things only worsen.

"Such were the heroes of old," the Torah narrates, "the men of name" (Bereishit 6:4). Wreaking terror and havoc, perpetuating oppression—these were humankind's boldest and brightest. God saw the future, Seforno explains, and the current story only ended in darkness.[6] For something to change, something must change. God's hope runs out.

In describing God's shift, the Torah twice uses verbs linked to *n-h-m*, which in context signify God's deep regret and changed mind, as it were, toward humankind (Bereishit 6:6-7). Radak and Ibn Ezra emphasize that the text speaks in "human language," that God does not literally experience emotions or thoughts as we do; rather, the Torah chooses an accessible medium to communicate its ideas.[7] Here, we read of God's distress and personal misgivings. Hope fallen from the heavens, banished from reality, is painful. The *midrash* ruminates over this, how the all-knowing God could mourn despite His foreknowledge expecting this outcome. R. Yehoshua retorts that parents know their children will eventually die, and asks: Then why cry at their death? The known tragedies are, indeed, still tragedies (*Bereishit Rabbah* 27:4).

There does appear a need, a chance, of reconciliation for God, for someone to change the reality, to restore hope, to rebuild the world.

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[4] Ramban to Bereishit 6:2, s.v. "benei ha-elokim."

[5] Rashi to Bereishit 6:3, s.v. "le-olam."

[6] Seforno to Bereishit 6:5, s.v. "ve-khol yeitzer mahshevot libo."

[7] Radak to Bereishit 6:6, s.v. "vayinahem H' "; Ibn Ezra *ad loc.*, s.v. "vayi-nahem H'."

Noah—the one pronounced to *yenahameinu*—is the apparent, suited candidate to save God from this cataclysmic end. Noah's destiny preceded his calling, and now, he will be the savior for humankind—and God.

II. The Righteous Candidate

What makes Noah worth saving? Which rubric is used to decide the fate of life or death? How did Noah score to satisfaction? The inclusion of origin stories varies throughout the Torah. Readers are left to decipher encoded comments from the text or submit to the answer's unknowability. In Noah's case, prior to God's command to him, we are briefly told of his birth and his birthing, along with a moral description. Otherwise, he remains an enigma—a hollow figure absent a context. Perhaps that itself is commensurate with the terse *pasuk* following God's determination to eliminate the earth: "And Noah found *hein* in the eyes of YHVH" (Bereishit 6:8).

This palindrome—*Noah* and *hein*—suggests a mirrored relationship, an alternative self peeking beneath the shadowed curtain. Noah embodies *hein* in some sense, harboring its essence in unconscious concealment. God's eyes see through external garments. *Hein*, to Seforno, connotes groundless favor, undeserving compassion—inexplicable mercy. Noah was unworthy of God's graciousness, Seforno says, for while he was innocent and righteous, he failed to moralize others of God.[8] This theme of Noah as an inanimate actor is found throughout the commentaries.

We are told that Noah was "a righteous man, perfect in his generations, with Elokim Noah walked" (Bereishit 6:9). These praises hold Noah in high regard—brandishing him as infallible by all accounts: morally just, wholly unblemished, God-conscious. It would appear that this tiers Noah exceptional in all categories, the obvious selection for humankind's salvation.

The commentaries are less sure.

For Ramban, the text speaks with complete accuracy: Noah was thoroughly pure and complete, *worthy* of saving.[9] Others, such as Seforno above, contend otherwise. Rashi cites a Talmudic dispute in *Sanhedrin* 108a that takes issue with the conditional clause "in his generations." Why, it's asked, is this included? One reading suggests Noah was righteous *despite* the wickedness of his generations; had he been placed in another, how much more so! The dissenter reads differently, seeing Noah's assessment as relative, not absolute; "in his generations," and not in other generations.

It almost seems as if there is an edge against Noah, an assumed supposition of his faulty nature, despite the Torah more plainly saying otherwise. Two *midrashim* complicate this question:

> "With Elokim Noah walked" (Bereishit 6:8). … R. Yehuda says it's a parable to a commander who has two sons—one big and one small.

[8] Seforno to Bereishit 6:8, s.v. "ve-Noah matza hein."

[9] Ramban to Bereishit 6:9, s.v. "be-dorotav."

> He says to the small one, "Walk *with* me," and says to the big one, "Come, walk *before* me." So it is with Avraham, whose power was beautiful, "walk *before* Me and be perfect" (Bereishit 17:1), but Noah, whose power was bad, "*with* Elokim Noah walked" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 30:10).

Noah was good, but Avraham was great (although R. Yehuda is less than generous to Noah).

Koho, his power, lacked. Something circulating within Noah's spirit, kinetic energy waiting for release, was lesser than Avraham's. A great hesitancy, an innate aversion, prods its head when Noah is evaluated on his own terms. The Midrash, apparently, echoes this unbridled urge to weigh Noah against successors, to frame him against others. Another *midrash* brandishes this approach with greater fury:

> Noah said to Moshe, "I am greater than you, for I was saved from the generation of the Flood." Moshe said to him, "I am more exalted than you—you saved yourself and did not have in you the power to save your generation. But I, I saved myself and I saved my generation who were liable for destruction because of the calf." Whence? As it is said, "And God changed His mind of the evil that He had said to do to His people" (Shemot 32:14). To what is the matter similar? To two ships which were in the sea and had within them two captains. One of them saved himself but not his ship, and one saved himself and his ship. Whom did they praise? Not the one who saved himself and his ship? So too with Noah, who only saved himself, but Moshe saved himself and his generation (*Devarim Rabbah* 11:3).

"*Ve-lo hayah bekha ko'ah*," Moshe says—"and you did not have in you the power, the power to save others, to protect your ship, your generation, from destruction." Herein lies the fundamental critique leveled against Noah: he could not be the people's savior.

III. Silent Obedience and Complicity

In the most technical sense, Noah did no wrong. Nowhere does God request that he save others, speak to others, or even consider others. God's instruction is sanitized of that concern. And indeed, Noah obeys God's every word—evocatively so.

God commands Noah, "Make for yourself an ark of gofer wood," followed by detailed requirements of the design (Bereishit 6:14-16). Noah is further told that God will make a covenant with him, and that "you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives" should board the ship—with the added injunction to store food "for you and for them" (*ibid.*, 6:18, 21). Some *pesukim* later, God—with itching repetition—says, "Come, you and all your household, to the ark, for I have seen that you were

righteous before me in this generation" (*ibid.*, 7:1).

Twice, the Torah accentuates Noah's compliance: "And Noah did like all that Elokim commanded him, so he did" (*ibid.*, 6:22). "And Noah did like all that YHVH commanded him" (*ibid.*, 7:5). As the floodwaters rise over the land, moving with rage and impending treachery, Noah remains a loyal soldier. That, though, was not what God wanted.

When God first tells Noah of the earth's fate, He cites one of the people's many moral failures: "Because the earth is filled with *hamas*" (*ibid.*, 6:13), understood as violence and robbery. Two *pesukim* earlier, as God observes the world's failure, Ralbag writes a chilling comment. The people committed *hamas*, he says, "before the greats and leaders, because they were unashamed, and there was no one to chastise them for the evil of their acts."[10] No accountability. Anarchy took hold of the world, but if one could have cried out to reprove injustice, perhaps it could have been different. God wanted the people to change—and Noah to fight for that.

Sometimes, one chooses to speak in hints, clues, for the recipient to trace the dotted lines and discover the speaker's true desires. God spoke to Noah in such a manner.

"There are multitude manners of rescue and relief before God," Rashi says, "[so] why trouble [Noah] with building [the ark]? For the people to see and inquire," he answers, "prompting Noah to inform them of God's plans—Perhaps they will repent."[11] Initially, God gave the people 120 years for *teshuvah*, a clear indication that He desired change over calamity. And yet, not only would Noah not perform such activity, but he would not even initiate it. The building, not Noah, would induce conversation.

Ancillary repetitions by God—"The end of all flesh has come before me" (*ibid.*, 6:13), "and I will destroy them with the earth" (*ibid.*), "and I will bring the floodwaters upon the earth to destroy all flesh" (*ibid.*, 6:17), "I will eliminate all of existence" (*ibid.*, 7:4)—scream to Noah. Why, in varying forms and descriptions, does God continue to issue the same doom? It appears the reason is to awaken, to arouse an impassioned moral contesting within Noah—if not toward the people than toward God. Everyone will die, God intimates, and that's My plan. But Noah sits still.

Throughout the bulk of the story, Noah utters not a single word. He acts in silence, following God's instruction with mechanical devotion. So much so that commentaries spot his dependence on guidance as powerful enough to drown him in death. Noah and his family entered the ark, the Torah records, "because of the waters of the flood" (*ibid.*, 7:7). Interpreting this phrase, Rashi classifies Noah as one of "small faith," only entering the ark because the waters forced him, pushed him, in.[12] "Were it

[10] Ralbag to Bereishit 6:11, s.v. "lifnei ha-Elokim."

[11] Rashi to Bereishit 6:14, s.v. "aseh lekha teivat."

[12] Rashi to Bereishit 7:7, s.v. "mipenei mei ha-mabul."

not for the waters reaching his ankles, he would not have entered the ark" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 32:6).

Even faced with his own death, Noah cannot act. If not God, then the very waters threatening his life will guide him. The single exception whilst in the ark is his sending the raven and dove to scout the earth to learn if the flood had subsided. When it does, God again must direct Noah: "Leave the ark" (Bereishit 8:16).

Noah's silent obedience suggests more than a reserved personality. It hints at complicity. Destruction breathes into his ears, humankind's extinction cries from below, and God anticipates objection. Nothing. Noah cannot approach a single person to warn them, nor can he articulate a single word, a single expression, of dissatisfaction. It almost paints him as an unwilling actor, a slave to God, incapable of harnessing independence, of fulfilling his call for heroism—before God or man. But upon leaving the ark and entering a new world, Noah becomes someone new. "And Noah built an altar for YHVH, and he took from every pure animal and every pure bird, and he offered whole burnt offerings on the altar" (*ibid.*, 8:20). Action of this kind is unprecedented for him. What explains it? The Midrash says:

> "And Noah built an altar for YHVH" (Bereishit 8:20). "He built" [*vayiven*] is written; he contemplated [*nitbonen*, related to *vayiven*]. He said, "For what did the Holy One, Blessed be He, command me to [bring] more pure [animals] than impure [ones]? Rather, to make an offering from them." Immediately, "And he took from every pure animal, etc." (*Bereishit Rabbah* 34:9).

He thought about it. Noah took moments to reflect upon not *what* God said, but *why* God said. That prompted God to swear that He will never again bring a flood as He did then. Action engenders change, even from God. It begs the question of what could have been had Noah paused earlier and wondered about God's plans. Perhaps the story would have been one of redemption, not extermination.

IV. The Trauma of Heroism

The story is not over. Although perhaps it should be. Until now, from the plain text alone, we encounter an eerily simple plot: Earth sins, God destroys, Noah lives, humanity begins (again). The hero remains unscathed and emerges victorious. Not quite. It's only afterward that the other side of heroic destiny rears its head.

In the aftermath of humankind's extinction, God implores Noah and his sons to reproduce: "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth" (Bereishit 9:1). Then, God establishes a covenant with Noah and his family. A disconcerting feeling emerges. The God who created life wiped it clean, and now, He tells you (Noah) to start anew. Though He swore to never perform this cycle again (at least with a flood), a tremor surely could have emerged within Noah. The Midrash agrees:

> Noah said to Him, "Master of the world, maybe You will retract [Your word] and

> bring a flood." He said to him, "Not so. I swear that I will not bring another flood upon the world" (*Midrash Tanhuma, Noah* 11).

What if evil would pollute his grandchildren, and then God would seek to eliminate them? Interestingly, for the remainder of the narrative portion, neither Noah nor his children are intimate with their wives, nor do they beget children, at least not in the text. What happens next is sudden and unambiguous. Though in some ways, not surprising: "*Vayahel Noah ish ha-adamah, vayita karem*" (Bereishit 9:20).

The first words, *vayahel Noah*, means "Noah began," or twisted, turned, anguished, profaned, polluted. A whirlpool of meanings descends upon him, a torrent of change. A metamorphosis takes shape, a new beginning, that reconfigures old forms in painful strides, growing pains. This is not growth, though, it's degradation, profanity, pollution. Noah decays. In what sense? He becomes *ish ha-adamah*, "the Man of the Land." In this new mode of being, Noah is enjoined to earth, identified with the soil. He is drawn down from his heights, signified by his first course of action: *vayita karem*—"he planted a vineyard." After sleepless nights aboard ship, sustaining every caged creature, enjoying no marital pleasures, Noah yearns for groundedness. To slip into comatose consciousness where bliss and pleasure live in stationary gel, Noah plants a vineyard.

"*Vayeisht min ha-yayin vayishkar, vayitgal be-tokh aholoh*." (Bereishit 9:21).

> *Vayeisht min ha-yayin vayishkar*—Noah "drank from the wine and became drunk." R. Hiyya bar Abba remarked, "On the same day he planted, on the same day he drank, on the same day he was humiliated" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 36:4).

Noah acts with impulsive immediacy. Swiftness accompanies his derision. Elsewhere, when the Midrash recounts the angels asking God on whose behalf they should praise God, harsh words are issued about Noah:

> [When] Noah came, they said to Him, "This is he?" He said to them, "This is a drunkard," as it's written, "And he drank of the wine, etc." (*Midrash Tanhuma, Kedoshim* 2).

Noah is rebranded a drunkard, someone debased from reality and imprisoned in desire. *Vayitgal be-tokh aholoh*—"And he was revealed within his tent." Physically, he was exposed, open, vulnerable, to looming violation. Gur Aryeh reads "*vayitgal*" as a more tarnishing expression—Noah came to separate and exile himself [related to the root of *galut*, the word for "exile"] from God. Having once been in *deveikut*, connection, attachment, to God, Noah now sits estranged from Him, caught in the curtains of his tent, a world isolated from the pillars where he previously stood.

What drives Noah to these ends is not delineated. It appears that, though he withstood the flood's violent rampage, he fell susceptible to earth's quiet

demeanor. Within himself, Noah is driven to *ha-adamah*, to become enveloped by the earth's serenity. And alcohol is the potion that transforms him into *ish ha-adamah*.

As if Noah's state is not bad enough, impropriety is thrust upon him in external humiliation and violation. Ham, Noah's youngest son, saw "his father's nakedness, and he told his two brothers outside" (Bereishit 9:22). It appears as a moment of disrespect, a shattering of paternal authority by the son. Yet, upon awakening, Noah "knew what was done to him by his smallest son" (Bereishit 9:24). He responds,

> "Cursed be Canaan. The lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers." And he said, "Blessed be YHVH, the God of Shem, and Canaan will be a slave to them" (Bereishit 9:25-26).

Through the commentaries and Midrash, it becomes clear that Ham did far more to his father than disrespect him. He violated him—sexually—a transgression of selfhood and safety, not least of which is trust. Noah, an inaudible actor for years, is pummeled beyond what his quietude can endure. He speaks, for the first time for us: *Arur*—"cursed," he proclaims, an issuance perhaps surging from vicissitudes survived to travails revived.

There is a certain trauma hidden in the story of Noah. Born to save, destined for it, he was righteous in adhering to God's word, holding His hands as he navigated the topographical struggles of his journey as God's "chosen one."

All trauma, Freud says, contains "an excess of demand." Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg explains:

> At points, one is addressed by something that is sensed as "indigestible." One can't do anything with what has presented itself; one can't translate it into a workable project. To be traumatized is to experience every attempt at naming, at interpretation, as leaving a remainder. Something that resists language remains of the unfathomable impact of the past.[13]

The demands that fell upon Noah appear to be such an excess: the sleepless nights, shivers aboard ship, emotional tremors, human fear, daunting faith, flooding responsibility. All while life withered outside the ark's small window. From God's very first recruitment, Noah failed to receive the full extent of his mission. He could not process the hints, the whispered intentions, beneath God's spoken words. The totality of this task asked too much of him. There remained an excess of demand.

Yenahameinu, Noah was said to be—the changemaker, peacemaker, savior, for his father on earth and his Father in Heaven. In this story of

[13] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Hidden Order of Intimacy: Reflections on the Book of Leviticus* (New York: Schocken, 2022), 204.

global and personal destruction, we wonder at what cost.

War Is a Very Ugly Thing but Not the Ugliest

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Six decades ago—in a highly secretive, logistically complex, and profoundly important mission—four undercover Israeli operatives seized one of the world's most wanted criminals in the dead of night on a quiet street in Argentina. The year was 1960. Their captive was Adolf Eichmann.

Responsible for orchestrating the transportation of Europe's Jews to the ghettos and the camps and one of the highest-ranking members of the Third Reich, he was charged with crimes against humanity and put on trial in Jerusalem for the world to see.

The press coverage was comprehensive and unprecedented, and it gripped the global imagination for months on end. Day after day, pages and pages were dedicated to disseminating the hours of harrowing testimony. But of all the extraordinary reporting that emerged from that court, journalism's most lasting contribution was a single four-word phrase, coined by a renowned philosopher who reported on the case for *The New Yorker*. Her name was Hannah Arendt, and her phrase was "the banality of evil."

Sitting amid the countless rows of correspondents, diplomats, and observers, she covered the Eichmann trial from start to finish, and she confessed that the thing which perplexed her most about the entire episode was Eichmann's absolute mediocrity. Knowing that he had directed deportations, led liquidations, and advanced the extermination of an entire population, she had expected the man at the defense bench to seem like a demonic, diabolical, monstrous creature. She had expected to see a savage villain to match the evil reputation that preceded him.

But sitting quietly behind bulletproof glass, he appeared simply as an inconspicuous bureaucrat—unexceptional and unremarkable in every way. And it was this nondescript presence that led her to invent the expression "the banality of evil"—along with the idea that while we may expect brutal atrocities to be carried out by malformed fiends, crimes against humanity can be committed, almost casually, by otherwise ordinary people.

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As the horrors perpetrated by Hamas have come to light, many questions have come to fore. But perhaps the one question that has occupied the minds of every civilized person on Earth has been not theological—"how God could let this happen?"—but anthropological. How could human beings be so inhumane? How could human beings be so depraved and perpetrate such outrageous barbarity?

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And, from my perspective, the answer to that question is—regrettably—rather simple. There is nothing in human nature that makes us humane. There is nothing in our DNA that teaches us that every single person on Earth deserves care and attention and sympathy and dignity. As creatures, we are all moral blank slates, motivated at our core by a sequence of what one notorious biologist has called 'selfish genes.' Driven by the impulse to survive, our primal instincts are egocentric and self-absorbed, narcissistic and oblivious to any call for sacrifice or philanthropy.

It may well be true, as some anthropologists have suggested, that evolution favors not the fittest but the friendliest—and that we, as a species, have survived over time by expanding our horizons, deepening our sympathies, and investing in friends. But even this theory does not see human beings driven by a sense of moral obligation but, fundamentally, by a bid for self-preservation—where our friends are not an end in themselves but the best bet for our own survival.

Though I was born and raised in Great Britain, I am—despite their flaws—in near-constant awe of the founders and framers of the United States and its laws. But there are two words in the American Declaration of Independence to which I take exception. Speaking of the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, Thomas Jefferson wrote: "We hold these truths to be self-evident." They are not self-evident.

The idea that every single human being has a right to life is not self-evident to our selfish genes; it needs to be taught. The idea that every single human being has a right to liberty is not self-evident to our selfish genes; it needs to be taught. And the idea that every single human being has a right to seek meaning and pursue happiness is not self-evident to our selfish genes; it too needs to be taught.

And that is where the Torah's story begins—with the opening pages of Genesis.

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Standing at the summit of Mount Sinai, a single prophet and leader of slaves inscribed a groundbreaking phrase as the culmination of the very first chapter of the Jewish constitution: "God created humanity in His image." (Genesis 1:27).

Standing at the foot of Sinai the Israelites were told that, at the dawn of time, God pierced the darkness with light and filled the void with life. And then we were taught a vital truth that was anything but self-evident: that every single human being is a vessel of divinity.

When we were born as a nation, we were taught a moral truth that had evaded civilization for millennia—a moral truth that had escaped the potentates and populations of Egypt and Greece and Mesopotamia, smothered beneath the weight of selfish genes and egomania—the moral truth that every single human being, no matter their rank or stature, is worthy of respect and compassion and

dignity and care.

It is not "natural" to treat every human being with deference and esteem; it is not "natural" for our appetites to surrender before the call of moral responsibility, which is why—for a whole variety of scholars including Joshua Berman,[1] Kyle Harper,[2] Tom Holland,[3] Eric Nelson,[4] Tomer Persico,[5] and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks[6]—the moral law revealed at Sinai erupted as a revolution in the affairs of humankind.

As Rabbi Sacks put it: "Hitler was not wrong when he called conscience a Jewish invention."[7] It is not human nature to be humane but the foundation of our faith—a creed that needs to be taught and reinforced repeatedly.

It is not accidental that, in an ordinary year, after we read the first pages of Genesis, our sages direct us to a passage in Isaiah when he says: "So says God… I have summoned you… to be a light unto the nations" (42:6).

God filled the world with light, but He summons us to spread and defend it. The reason that we are willing to pay such a high price for private tuition is not simply so that our kid's friends have kosher homes, but because we know that the moral code invoked at Sinai is not innate and needs to be taught.

That is why the attempts at impartiality or neutrality on the part of some elite universities is not only tragic but dangerous. It is not human nature to be humane—ethics are not innate. If institutions of higher learning aspire to be more than merely way-stations of information, they ought to train their students not only to process data or articulate different views but to choose a moral frame.

The idea that free speech will inexorably lead to moral clarity and the unwavering devotion to the sanctity of humanity is completely misconceived—so while they ought to permit free speech, they ought to brand not only Hamas but any defense of Hamas for what it has been revealed to be: evil,

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[1] Joshua A. Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[2] Kyle Harper, "Christianity and the Roots of Human Dignity in Late Antiquity," in *Christianity and Freedom, Volume 1: Historical Perspectives*. eds. Timothy Samuel Shah and Allen D. Hertzke (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[3] Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2019).

[4] Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[5] Tomer Persico, *Adam Be-Tzelem Elohim: Ha-Ra'ayon She-Shinah Et Ha-Olam Ṿe-et Ha-Yahadut [In God's Image: The Making of the Modern World]* (Rishon le-Tziyon: Yedi'ot Aḥaronot, 2021).

[6] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

[7] Ibid., 190.

depraved, and inhumane.

There are competing ideologies out there—where the weak are to be culled, and the old are to be killed, and the other is to be exterminated—and silence or neutrality gives them the space to grow. At the end of his tenure, as a final reminder to our ancestors, Moses said: "Life and death I place before you… choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

We are now in a defensive war against human beings who promote an inhumane ideology—whose barbarity threatens our brothers and sisters, the civilians of the region, and the rest of humanity. This war is to secure Israel's borders, but more than that it is to combat a cult that incites violence, creates carnage, and celebrates death—it is to liberate those held hostage by those who forsake their humanity.

We can no longer turn the other cheek, because we have a duty to protect the weak and counter the malignant creed which teems in the tunnels beneath the streets of Gaza, where it breeds moral depravity. Tragically this war—as all wars—will entail the loss of human life on all sides, and our minds will no doubt be swimming in images that inspire agony. And at times like this we are reminded of words written by John Stuart Mill:

> War is an ugly thing—but not the ugliest of things: the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing *worth* a war, is worse… [And] as long as justice and injustice have not terminated *their* ever renewing fight for ascendancy in the affairs of [hu]mankind, human beings must be willing, when need is, to do battle for the one against the other.[8]

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Evil can be banal because goodness needs to be taught. Cruelty can be casual, inhumanity can become natural, and what we see as unfathomable and incomprehensible can come to pass if we do not do our part to instill human hearts with compassion. Ronald Reagan once said:

> Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it on to our children in the bloodstream. The only way they can inherit the freedom we have known is if we fight for it, protect it, defend it, and then hand it to them with the well taught lessons of how they in their lifetime must do the same. And if you and I don't do this, then you and I may well spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it once was like in America when men

[8] John Stuart Mill, "The Contest in America," first published in *Fraser's Magazine* (February 1862).

were free.

The idea, first taught on the summit of Sinai to a single prophet and a small band of slaves, has been disseminated by multiple faiths across the ages over the face of the earth so successfully that we take it to be self-evident—but our summons to defend and spread the light of revelation is not yet complete.

As long as other ideologies still compete for believers, as long as evil or moral ambiguity still breeds unabated, we have an obligation to stand up and speak out and give voice to heaven's vision for humanity, where everyone—including the weak and the old and the other—has a divine spark and the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of purpose.

May the coming weeks bring us all a little closer to true peace as we try, with all our hearts, to contest inhumanity and sow the seeds of our collective redemption.