



SERMON B'REISHIT:ⁱ THE HUMAN UNDER THE HORN

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 30 September 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

1 The Orthodox chief rabbi of Israel has said that those working on identifying corpses, during this terrible, terrible time, should continue working throughout Shabbat.ⁱⁱ He ruled that these efforts come under the category of פיקוח נפש, the preservation of life, which overrides Shabbat: *"If it is found that [the body of] so-and-so is here,"* he said, *"they can be removed from the list of the missing"* – and thereby their family's extreme mental torment, the torment of not knowing their loved one's fate, will be eased.

2 In this morning's parashah, there is someone whose fate is unknown. The death of Cain is never mentioned. He simply drops out of the narrative,ⁱⁱⁱ and onto the list of the missing... until the rabbis filled in the gap with a story of their own:^{iv}

Lamech, Cain's great-great-great-grandson, was blind, and used to go out hunting with his young son leading him by the hand. When the son saw an animal, he would tell Lamech. One day, he said: *"I see an animal!"* Lamech shot an arrow towards it – and killed Cain (for it was he). The boy went to look at the body and said: *"Father, it looks like a man, except that there is a horn emerging from its forehead."* [The horn was the mark which God had placed on Cain to identify him as a murderer.] And Lamech cried out: *"Oy! It's my ancestor [Cain]!"* He clasped his hands together in emotion, and in doing so, accidentally hit his son's head and killed him too.

What an utterly depressing text. So much death; pointless death, needless death, gratuitous death. And there can be no doubt that Lamech is entirely responsible for it all. What sort of blind person

ⁱ Genesis 4:16-26

ⁱⁱ David Lau, Facebook [Hebrew] (11 October 2023): <<https://www.facebook.com/rabbidlau/videos/163171053521815/>>

ⁱⁱⁱ James Kugel, "Why was Lamech blind?", *Hebrew Annual Review* 12 (1990), 91-103.

^{iv} There are many versions of this narrative: see *ibid*. This version is from Midrash Tanchuma, B'reishit 11.

continues to use a bow and arrow in public? What sort of adult lets their infant son control a deadly weapon?

3 Allegorically, this story has many similarities with the situation in Israel-Palestine. An elder, blinded by bloodlust, corrupting a youth into doing his dirty work, at the cost of his family's lives, while at the same time selfishly preserving his own.

4 Israelis and Palestinians are all בני אברהם, descendants of Abraham, yet Hamas's leaders, blinded by hatred, have manipulated and radicalised young men into perpetrating sickening acts of violence. Their Israeli victims, of course, die. The attackers, inevitably, die. Everybody suffers except the elders of Hamas, safe in their luxury apartments in Qatar,^v who delegate their evil to those whose lives they consider expendable.

5 Now, one might point out that it was Cain who brought murder into the world. One might say that he was the author of his own destruction. Poetic justice.^{vi}

6 But what a morally vacuous argument that would be! Nobody had to murder Cain, by that point a frail and vulnerable old man, no matter the misdeeds of his youth. And nobody has to murder young adults at a music festival, no matter the misdeeds of their government. There has been a wave of commentary, including on the streets of Brighton,^{vii} arguing that Hamas's terrorist actions were justified forms of 'resistance': they say that Israeli civilians are not entitled to be treated humanely because of their leaders' own failures of humanity. Yet if the blame for killing in the present can be laid on events in the past, then killers are freed from the burden of being held responsible for their own choices and their own behaviour.

7 The fact is that, last Shabbat, Hamas was not attacking an abstract piece of Israeli government policy. They were attacking real people. Actual individuals, with lives and backgrounds and stories and

^v James Rothwell, "The Hamas leader behind group's deadliest attack on Israel", *The Telegraph* (8 October 2023): <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/10/08/hamas-leader-ismail-haniyeh-behind-attack-on-israel/>>

^{vi} See, in particular, Kugel, *ibid*: 94.

^{vii} Daniel Green, "Sussex University student union officer 'celebrates' Israel attacks", *The Argus* (10 October 2023): <<https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/23845085.sussex-university-student-union-officer-celebrates-israel-attacks/>>



hopes and dream and fears of their own. Lamech spent his time trying to identify anything that moved and have it killed, without regard to whether or not it was a person, indeed a family member. He could not perceive Cain's personhood, just the horn on his head. And Hamas has sought to cause as much injury as possible to the 'Israel' that they hate, uncaring of the fact that the victims of that injury were not some great, hornéd political enemy but simply human beings.

8 And the pendulum of violence continues to swing. Gaza has now been blockaded with a terrifying totality, deliberately depriving more than two million civilians of food, water, electricity and medical supplies.^{viii} Half of the population – a million people – have been ordered by Israel to leave their homes pending a ground assault, but there is no suggestion as to where they will go or how, without fuel, they will get there.^{ix}

9 An Israeli government minister said: *“No switch will be turned on, no hydrant will be activated ... until the ... hostages are returned. Humanity for humanity. And let nobody talk to us about morals.”*^x

10 Well, no, actually, I will talk about morals. Those of us who are Jewish, who believe that our tradition teaches us how to live, will and must talk about morals. It was wrong – beyond wrong: evil, abhorrent – for Hamas to take civilian hostages. And – not ‘but’ but ‘and’ – it is wrong for Israel to threaten civilians with starvation and to expel them from their homes with no roadmap for what happens next.

11 *“Humanity for humanity”*, using basic decency as a bargaining chip, is such a chilling concept. Acting like a human is not optional: it is a basic part, the most basic part, of the identity of our species. And who will pay the price for this latest lapse in humanity? Innocent Palestinians, yes, and also innocent Israelis, youngsters,

^{viii} Rianna Schmunk, “Food will run out in days under Israel’s total blockade of Gaza, humanitarian experts warn”, *CBC News* (11 October 2023): <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/israeli-palestinian-conflict-gaza-blockade-1.6990923>>

^{ix} Israel Debre, “Israel orders unprecedented evacuation of 1 million in Gaza as possible ground offensive looms”, *ABC News* (13 October 2023): <<https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/israel-orders-evacuation-11-million-people-northern-part-103948930>>

^x Israel Katz, Twitter [Hebrew] (12 October 2023): <https://twitter.com/Israel_katz/status/1712356130377113904>



maybe friends and family of this congregation, conscripted into the IDF and placed in harm's way by their ministers and admirals and generals.

12 Hamas's leaders are firmly in the position of Lamech: blinded by hatred, placing their young in dangerous situations in order to inflict violence on their kin. We can only hope and pray that Israel's leaders, justifiably reeling from the bloodshed of the last week, do not give in to the temptation to assume Lamech's position in the days and weeks to come.

13 There are no winners in a war like this. The only way it can be won is by humanity itself. As my teacher Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg has put it:^{xi}

We [must] refuse to root for the safety and lives and rights of [different groups of] human beings like they are sports teams ... [as if] safety is a finite resource that must be hoarded.

Cain was killed because the only part of his body that anybody noticed was the horn on his head. The person underneath was completely overlooked.

14 Whatever comes next, it is going to be long, and gory, and tragic, and difficult. Physically distant and yet emotionally close to the unfolding events, we, British Jews, are without a doubt going to suffer and worry vicariously. But that is not a bad thing. We have to hold onto those feelings. Our feelings are what separate us from Lamech: when we see, and care for, and care about, the fate of people we may never have met, thousands of miles away, we exemplify what it is to be a human being.

15 If that phrase, “[h]umanity for humanity”, is to mean anything, it must be that humanity breeds humanity, and by our care and concern for the lives of all innocents in this hideous conflict, we will bring light and healing into the world. בן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

^{xi} Danya Ruttenberg, “A lot of things are true”, *Life is a Sacred Text* (13 October 2023): <<https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com/p/a-lot-of-things-are-true>>

