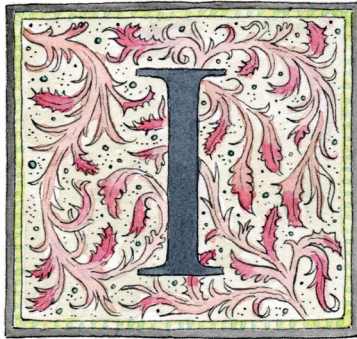


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# The Torah of October 7

*Shame and guilt in Genesis and Palestinian society*



IN THE WEEK following October 7, the annual cycle of reading the Torah from beginning to end began anew. It was a welcome reminder that Jewish life and letters live in tandem, and that in our tradition, what follows the end (Simchat Torah) is always the beginning (Genesis).

The Kabbalistic teaching that God had to withdraw himself in order to make room for the material universe, life, and above all, human free will, was all too resonant just days after God’s apparent absence from southern Israel. As was the text’s focus on evil: “Sin crouches at the door; its urge is toward you” (Genesis 4:7).

The very notion of sin and the urge toward it implies the need, if not always the will, to resist it, a resistance that requires knowledge of good and evil. God, wishing humans to be autonomous moral agents able to choose between the two, wanted us to know the difference.

This required, as many have pointed out, eating the so-called forbidden fruit. The first sin, then, was Adam's, not Eve's, in his deflection of guilt. "Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?" asked God, to which Adam replied, "The woman You put at my side—she gave me of the tree, and I ate" (Genesis 3:12). A double deflection—first admonishing God for creating the woman and then the woman for her seductive invitation. Eve follows his lead, pointing her finger at the snake. Deflecting blame begets deflection.

One can understand why God kicked the couple out: There's nothing worse than having to live forever with whining scapegoaters who blame everyone else, and each other, for their own mistakes and misfortune. The Garden of Eden is not to become *No Exit*.

On the contrary, the Garden of Eden is the stage for a different drama: the drama of free will. The message is that we humans ought to take that freedom more seriously than we are inclined to do, especially when we make bad choices. The refusal to take responsibility for one's actions is, as political observers from Socrates to Erich Fromm have noted, an attempt to escape the demands of freedom. Such escapes find refuge in freedom's enemy: tyranny.

The responsible exercise of free will undergirds all experiments in free societies. Democracies, dedicated as they are to the proposition that all citizens should be equally free, must ask of those citizens, those electing and those elected, to embrace the responsibility of that freedom, to engage in ongoing *self*-criticism and *reciprocal* criticism. As Leviticus wisely establishes, the necessary prologue to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) is "Surely you will rebuke him" (Leviticus 19:17) and therefore, obviously, *allow him to rebuke you*. The resilience and creativity of democracy correspond to the ability to learn from our (and our compatriots') mistakes and to enact those lessons through open discourse.

This is why free societies are more likely than repressive societies to have what anthropologist Ruth Benedict called “guilt cultures,” in which people value moral responsibility and the distinction between right and wrong or, to speak in Genesis terms, good and bad. In “shame cultures,” by contrast, people value more how they are perceived by others. In guilt cultures, the truth, no matter how painful, is essential; in shame cultures, the pain of shame is unbearable and must be deflected. And for that reason, self-criticism is in very short supply and in even less demand. Participants in such “shame-honor” societies end up valuing the *appearance* of good over good itself and therefore show little appetite for the fruit of that knowledge. While shame cultures focus primarily on honor in the eyes of others, guilt cultures try to focus on integrity, sometimes at the cost of honor. When Judah said of the pregnant Tamar, “She is more in the right than I” (Genesis 38:26), he chose public shame and private integrity over public honor and private guilt.



*Sinat chinam* is a Hebrew expression meaning gratuitous (or baseless) hatred. Mostly, Jews use it to self-criticize. The concept is famously deployed in the Talmud (Yoma 9b) as an explanation for the destruction of the Second Temple. In a rather elaborate narrative, the Talmud illustrates a singular instance of how this baseless hatred had taken hold of society and led to its destruction. In the story, a wedding guest is humiliated and proceeds to take vengeance by inciting the Romans against the Jews (Gittin 55b).

Of course, that somewhat banal tale of deliberate humiliation sidesteps what we know about the time from Josephus—that it was full of apocalyptic hatreds among factions, all convinced they were God’s agents in the imminent Great Redemption. Seen in terms

of these dynamics, the rabbis' explanation of *sinat chinam* arises from a retrospective realization that those world-salvific hatreds that seemed cosmically significant *before* look dramatically different *after* the failure of that Redemption to materialize. The rabbis' version turns it from a historical moment of millennial politics into a lesson in morality.

But it is far more than that. The rabbis' story marks a major step in the transformation from a shame culture to a guilt culture, from the kind of society that is propelled by the fear of humiliation and the lust for honor into one that generates energy and initiative from a sense of responsibility and reciprocity. The rabbis deeply internalized the lessons of the destruction of Jerusalem and inaugurated a massive intellectual and emotional project that fostered immense resilience in the face of those disasters.

The rabbis' insight is not merely qualitative but quantitative as well. Pirkei Avot 6:6 lists 48 practices and character traits that allow one to live in accordance with the Torah. Among them are "Who loves righteous ways, Who loves rebuke, Who loves uprightness, Who keeps himself far from honors." (Needless to say, the rebuke here is received, not given.) Notice the loving of rebuke and the distancing from honor. In a shame-honor culture, the greater and more unbearable the humiliation, the more murderous the projected hatred. In the 14th century, Christian theologians in the West accused Jews of killing Christ (i.e., God), not out of blindness but deliberately, and they then transformed their angry shame over this rejection into new and more malevolent levels of baseless religious hatred.

Framing the conflict as one between shame culture and guilt culture further illuminates the lesson of Genesis. What immediately preceded Adam's sin? Shame. Whereas previously he and Eve had been "naked . . . yet felt no shame" (2:25), after eating the fruit,

“the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked” (3:7). And what immediately follows the shame? Finger-pointing. It is an inherent feature of the human condition to respond to shame with deflection and projection. This is the lesson of the creation story we read the week of October 7.

The Arab relationship to Israel—an unprecedented tale of global humiliation—follows precisely this projective scapegoating. The problem originates in the belief that Muslims must have visible superiority over infidels, even fellow monotheists. Jews, as dhimmis, are “protected” from Muslim violence by their acceptance of their legal inferiority (religious apartheid) and their disgraced social standing. Hence, triumphalist Muslim irredentism about Israel: A state of free infidels in (what should be) Dar al-Islam is a shame to the Muslim world and a blasphemy to Islam.

Senior Hamas official Ghazi Hamad put it bluntly:

The existence of Israel is what causes all that pain, blood, and tears. It is Israel, not us. We are the victims of the occupation. Period. Therefore, nobody should blame us for the things we do. On October 7, October 10, October 1,000,000—everything we do is justified.

This is but an update of a Muslim Brotherhood discourse that goes back a century. When Hamad says “occupation,” he means every grain of sand from the river to the sea, because all of it is formerly Muslim territory (*waqf*), and it must all be recovered. That is why Hamad’s words begin with the shame of Israel’s “existence” before preceding to his, and Hamas’s, deflection. Israel is responsible for Hamas’s actions, not Hamas itself.

From the beginning of Israel’s existence, this theological shame-cum-hatred became a centerpiece of Arab nationalist rhetoric. When

the partition plan to create an Arab state and a Jewish state was announced in 1947, Abdul Rahman Azzam, secretary-general of the Arab League, said that such a plan would lead to “a war of extermination and momentous massacre which will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacre and the Crusades.” Why the reference to the Crusades? Because, like the medieval war with the Christians, this is a holy war about wholly Islamic land. And why the intensity of the hatred? It is a projection of Islamic shame.

One can perhaps empathize with this theological reaction. For many in the Muslim world, experiencing viscerally the loss of a great empire, the battle against the Jews was religiously existential. With their vastly greater numbers, fighting against *al-Yahood*—the most cowardly of the dhimmi, who had not commanded an army for 2,000 years—the Arab leaders who declared the war ultimately suffered a stunning defeat at the hands of just over half a million Jews, some fresh off the boats from the Holocaust. This *nakba* (catastrophe) brought global shame upon them and the Arab world, a humiliation repeated even more devastatingly in 1967. And in every case, the Arab elites responsible for these humiliating public failures dealt with their unbearable shame by denial and deflection (not recognizing Israel, not letting the refugees settle where they fled, not making peace, but rather leaving millions under Israeli sovereignty).

Certain segments of the Left took their sympathy for Arab decline to an extreme, particularly in the context of America’s response to 9/11. By 2003, at the height of a Hamas-led suicide terror war against Israel, it became, in the words of Ian Buruma, “a litmus test of liberal credentials to support the Palestinians.” How could liberals collectively adopt a movement so violent, with such sheer contempt for their own values? Paul Berman explained the quantitative logic of the projection:

Each new act of murder and suicide testified to how oppressive were the Israelis. Palestinian terror, in the view, was the measure of Israeli guilt. The more grotesque the terror, the deeper the guilt.

In the fever pitch of protests and campus encampments that followed October 7, one sees Berman's matrix dogmatically applied: Israeli oppression justifies Hamas's sadism.

But not everywhere, even in places one might not think to look. After October 7, the Iraqi-based Global Imams Council condemned Hamas's barbaric and terrorist acts in no uncertain terms, as did one of Israel's most famous Arab influencers, the vlogger Nas Daily (Nusseir Yassin). Another Israeli Arab, Mohammad Kabiya, had this exchange with a BBC Arabic anchor:

MOHAMMAD KABIYA: Is this the Islamic religion that Hamas is wearing as a cloak? The Islamic religion is innocent from Hamas. Innocent from these shameful acts against the Islamic religion and against everyone who claims to be a Muslim.

BBC ARABIC ANCHOR: This is what you say, but Hamas has another point of view.

MOHAMMAD KABIYA: This is what the noble verses say: "Do not kill anyone without justice." What right do they have to kill these children and these women? In every country and every region where the Iranian groups have influence, we see the state destroyed. Lebanon is destroyed; Syria is destroyed; Iraq is destroyed. These countries belong to Iran. Gaza destroyed. While the countries that have peace with Israel... we see them thriving more and more.

Polls, words, and deeds of some Arab citizens of Israel suggest that Kabiya is not alone in this sentiment. Additionally, some Muslims, born in the Middle East, even previously radicalized, show a deep and

humane understanding of the problems: Ed Hussein, Maajid Nawaz, Aymenn Jawad Al-Tammimi, Hussein Aboubakr, Loay Alshareef.

These courageous voices are still marginal in the Arab and Muslim world—they are primarily exiles to the West, who often defend democratic values more ably than Westerners do. But they may have more purchase now, post-Abraham Accords, though the enthusiastic support for the October 7 attacks and the predictable gullibility of the legacy media to Hamas's claims of civilian casualties severely damages that possibility. Hamas and the other supremacists make clear that the war with Israel is something of a conflict within Islam and Arab society itself, between the forces of shame-honor culture on one side and the forces of guilt-integrity culture on the other. Hamas's diversion of nearly two decades' worth of international aid—billions of dollars—to turn a small land with 2 million inhabitants into a military camp where the civilians serve as shields from the violence Hamas deliberately provokes makes clear that Hamas is fighting to wipe out Arab-Muslim shame, not to free their people. As the Global Imams Council has shown, and the rabbis of the Talmud before them, there is another way. Shame on those who choose to align with death. \*