

## What This War is About

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What this war is about On October 7, Israel became the most dangerous country in the world for Jews. The atrocity Hamas inflicted was literally unbearable. This is a war against the return of Jewish helplessness. Much of the world reacted to the massacre by calling the atrocity scenes unbearable. When Israelis say those images are “unbearable,” we mean it literally. We cannot bear this, cannot allow the massacre to redefine us as a nation. We are at war to erase the catastrophic perception of Israelis as victims. Even more than the atrocities themselves, what was so – yes – unbearable to many of us was the helplessness of our fellow Israelis. Nothing is more antithetical to the Israeli ethos than for Jews to be burned alive with their hands bound behind their backs, with the IDF nowhere in sight.

In the days immediately following the massacre, I received calls from several European journalists, asking if I saw this as a “Holocaust moment.” They were sympathetic; they meant well. But I couldn’t give them the answer they were seeking. I don’t need Auschwitz to motivate me to defend myself against Hamas, I replied. I live in the Middle East; the fate of the Yazidis is more relevant to me than Babyn Yar. Nor do I trust European sympathy for Israel that is based on the Holocaust. That support is unstable; today it is applied to dead Jews, tomorrow to dead Palestinians. The support I seek is based on the understanding that Israel faces a genocidal regime on its southern border, that that regime must be destroyed not only for our sake but for the sake of the region, and that the only way to destroy a terrorist infrastructure embedded in a civilian population is the way the IDF is proceeding. The outpouring of sympathy for Israel was good for our souls, especially in those traumatic first days. But we all knew that much of that sympathy would begin to evaporate with the terrible scenes of devastation in Gaza. And we also knew that, given the choice, we preferred to be condemned than pitied. Necessarily, in the immediate aftermath of the massacre, we disseminated the atrocity photos and brought foreign journalists to the scene of the slaughter. But in the face of growing suffering in Gaza, the political effectiveness of those images is fading. We need to make our case against Hamas not by seeking the world’s pity but its understanding. We are not engaged with the Palestinians in a competition for victimhood. The Palestinians will always win that competition, and rightly so. In opting for power, the Jewish people opted out of the victimhood competition. There is a price to pay for the loss of innocence. We have no choice but to own it.

### **This is a war to restore Israeli deterrence.**

In recent days, I’ve received messages from friends abroad, warning me that Israel is about to repeat the mistakes America made in Afghanistan and Iraq. You are walking into a trap, they say, there is no quick fix; Hamas is an idea, not just a movement. You need an end-game, a vision for Gaza the morning after, a vision for peace with the Palestinians. I fear they may be right. But those concerns are irrelevant to Israel’s most urgent need, which is the immediate restoration of our shattered deterrence. At no time in Israeli history, including the first catastrophic days of the Yom Kippur War, has our military credibility been so undermined. Hamas’s blow was devastating precisely because it was the weakest of our enemies – and because the army failed so miserably, not only to preempt the attack at the border but to stop the atrocities as they were happening, effectively abandoning the towns and kibbutzim to their

fate. To lose deterrence is to invite aggression on our other besieged borders. It is to convey to our enemies that Israel has lost its edge and no longer has what it takes to survive as the only non-Arab and non-Muslim state in one of the world's most dangerous regions. That is what makes this an existential war for Israel – not in the short-term, but not necessarily the long-term either. Those who caution against invading Gaza rarely offer Israel an alternative. (Would they prefer that we bomb Iran?) Not to react decisively carries potentially greater danger for Israel than military miscalculation. If this war ends in another Hamas - Israeli stalemate, the Iranian front along our borders will become far more emboldened.

**This is a war against the Iranian axis.**

This has never been the “Israeli-Palestinian” conflict alone. For most of the last 75 years of Israel's existence, it was the Arab -Israeli conflict. In recent years, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been supplanted by the radical Shiite-Israeli conflict. Like the Arab world a generation ago, the radical Shiite axis is committed to Israel's destruction. To focus only on the fighting in Gaza is to misunderstand what is happening there. This is war with Iran by proxy. In what may once have been a marriage of convenience, Hamas, the only Sunni component of the Iranian alliance, has embraced the theological agenda of the Iranian Revolution and its quest for regional hegemony. Iran has already won two historic victories against Israel. Despite a decades-long Israeli campaign, Iran is now on the nuclear threshold. And it threatens us on three of our borders – Gaza, Lebanon and Syria. The massacre marks a turning point in our war with the radical Shiite axis. For now, Iran is winning.

**This is a war to restore the contract between the Israeli people and its state.**

One of the most devastating moments for me in the aftermath of the massacre was a televised interview with the father of a murdered young woman. “The people of Israel is amazing,” he said. “But I'm finished with the state.” Israelis have never gone to war so lacking in faith in their leaders. Israelis were bitterly divided during the 1982 Lebanon War. Yet no one seriously doubted that Menachem Begin and Arik Sharon were doing what they believed was best for Israel, that they put Israel's interests ahead of their own. For a large part of the Israeli public, that is hardly the case today. We have never experienced anything like this: a prime minister, in time of war, who is afraid to mingle with the troops because of the outrage he is likely to encounter. Astonishingly but not surprisingly, the government's abandonment of the south persisted even after the massacre. The state has been criminally ineffective in dealing with the basic needs of the survivors. That incompetence is a direct result of this government, which has systematically replaced professional civil servants with political hacks, undoing decades of reform in the civil service. Responsibility for the survivors was assumed by the activists of the democratic protest movement – those whom this government labeled as traitors. This is the war of a leaderless people taking responsibility for itself. Our great achievement in the aftermath of the massacre was the way that Israeli society, entirely motivated from the bottom up, effectively mobilized itself. Many reservists didn't wait to be called up; civilians overwhelmed the blood banks with donations. Dissonance is built into the Israeli reality, and no moment is more dissonant than now. The paradox of this war is that, while the distrust and contempt for our leaders has never been higher, neither has our morale, our love of country, our readiness to sacrifice, even our ability to unite. This is the moment of maturation of the Israeli people. In taking responsibility for the country, we have created a new dynamic. Still, the ability of citizens to step into the breach created by an inept and corrupt government cannot be

taken for granted. The basis of a citizen's relationship with the state is reciprocity. We sacrifice for the state, and the state protects our lives and commits to our basic welfare. The rupture between the state and its citizens must be repaired, by restoring our faith in our institutions. The first is the IDF. In every poll over the years, the institution Israelis have trusted most is the army. This is a war to determine whether that trust will continue. Without our confidence in the army's ability to protect us, Israel will unravel. On October 7, Israel became the most dangerous country in the world for Jews. Many Israelis are now quietly asking themselves whether they can raise families here. In the early 1950s, when Israel was experiencing a wave of terror attacks and the IDF seemed incapable of effective response, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion declared that the state has an obligation to reassure Jewish immigrants coming from around the world that they didn't make a mistake in trusting the promise of Zionism to protect them. Destroying Hamas is a crucial step in restoring that broken promise.

**This war is a test of the moral credibility of the international community.**

The challenge for outsiders to this conflict is to sympathize with the innocents suffering on both sides, without obscuring the difference between Israel and Hamas. For the dead and the wounded among Gaza's civilians, it obviously makes no difference that Israel didn't intend to harm them. But intent is the difference between war as tragedy and war as barbarism. For Israeli policy-makers, the precedent for destroying Hamas is the war on ISIS, which resulted in massive destruction, dislocation and civilian deaths. Destroying Hamas is no less a moral imperative than destroying ISIS. Many around the world – and not only Israel-haters – are raising the argument that the occupation drives Palestinians to terrorism. But the reverse is no less true: Terrorism has reinforced the occupation, by convincing Israelis that withdrawal from the West Bank would turn it into another Gaza. The fatal miscalculation of Israel's enemies is that they mistake Israel for a rootless colonial project that will go the way of Rhodesia and white-ruled South Africa. Inflict enough atrocities and the Jews will flee "back to Poland." (Palestinian apologists never say, "back to Iraq, back to North Africa," which is where a majority of Israeli Jews come from.) A colonialist state would have long since become fatally demoralized and surrendered to the relentless terrorism and war and siege. But enmity has only made Israel stronger, because its people are home. Now our enemies have united us – this time, inducing in a single day the miraculous turn-around of a nation so divided we seemed on the verge of civil war, to a nation defined once again by shared purpose and effort. Israelis have reacted as we always do to existential threat. Close to 200,000 Israelis have flown back home since the massacre, many to join their reservist units. The demand has been so high that El Al has allowed passengers who couldn't book seats to sit on the floor of returning flights. The failure of the Palestinian national movement, in all its factions, to understand that it is facing not a colonialist entity but a re-indigenized people whose story is unique in history is the main reason why this conflict has been insoluble. Until that perception changes, even Israelis like myself who see a two-state solution as an existential necessity for Israel will also see it as an existential threat. This war is a chance for Israel and its friends to change the narrative of colonialist Israel that has taken hold in much of the West, and to restore a measure of complexity to the discourse on the conflict.

**This is a war against evil.**

There is a crucial distinction between committing evil and becoming evil. There are acts of such profound cruelty that the Divine image in which we are created can be erased *Tikkun Olam* is a

commitment to simultaneously enhance good and diminish evil. *Tikkun Olam* is not only about social justice; defeating Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were ultimate expressions of repairing the world. Destroying Hamas is a *Tikkun Olam* imperative. At the same time, fighting evil doesn't mean a suspension of moral ground rules; the opposite is true. One must be careful not to become tainted by the evil you are fighting, for both practical and spiritual reasons. Practically, the way to win this war is by retaining our moral credibility among Diaspora Jews and among Israel's non-Jewish friends. We don't target innocents; we don't dehumanize an entire people; we do what we can, given the constraints of the situation and the goals of the war, to minimize civilian deaths. According to international law, proportionality means taking into account both civilian lives and the nature of the threat one is trying to contain. In an existential war against a genocidal enemy hiding behind civilians, the boundaries of proportionality change. But red lines remain and our political and military leaders need to grapple with the moral imperative of destroying Hamas and the moral imperative of preserving life. There is no neat formula for navigating these wrenching dilemmas; the basic requirement is that red lines remain part of the Israeli conversation. A war against evil is fought with fierce determination, but without blind hatred for an entire people, let alone an entire religion. Palestinian society, along with the Arab and Muslim worlds, have much to answer for. But Hamas and the Palestinian people are not the same. There was widespread disaffection toward Hamas before this war: A remarkable project, "Whispered in Gaza," recording anonymous Palestinians exposing Hamas brutality and corruption was published last January in the Times of Israel. What the Jewish far right doesn't understand about Israel's power is that it derives from the unity of the Jewish people, both here and in the Diaspora, on our shared belief in the justness of our cause. Over the last year, large parts of the Israeli public lost faith in the moral direction of the country. The crisis threatened to unravel crucial parts of the military. Israel's power also depends on maintaining the trust of our friends. The contempt that leading members of this government were expressing only recently toward President Biden is indicative of the far right's childish attitude toward power. We owe no accountability to the hypocrites who would turn Israel into the criminal of nations, like those delegates at the UN Human Rights Council, who two days after the massacre stood in solemn mourning for the "victims in Palestine and elsewhere" – this, while we were still fighting terrorists holed up in Israeli homes along the Gaza border. But we do owe a moral reckoning to our friends. The war against evil is ultimately a spiritual war. Divine protection for Israel, the Torah warns us, is conditional on our behavior. "You shall purge the evil from your midst," it commands. There are those in our midst who have indiscriminately attacked innocent Palestinians. Most Israelis are repulsed by those acts. But by no means all. One Knesset member from the "Jewish Power" party, a part of the coalition, recently called an Israeli who burned alive a Palestinian family "holy," and no one in her party disagreed. Especially during times of danger to Israel, those sentiments pose a grave danger to our spiritual protection. To win this war against evil requires steadiness and balance. Leftwing Jews need to understand that the Jewish people cannot afford the purity of powerlessness, while rightwing Jews need to understand that power requires moral limits. As a people, we must not be indifferent to the anguish of Gaza. And we must not allow that anguish to undermine our resolve to destroy Hamas.