

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Noach, Genesis, Chapters 6-11

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

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The Bible and *Hamas*: A Tale of Light vs. Darkness

In 2014, a language columnist in Israel examined the meaning of a word on every Israeli's mind as the IDF engaged in an operation in Gaza. The word was the name of a terrorist organization. Shoshana Kordova noted that this word also appeared in the Hebrew Bible:

The Arabic name of the group is widely described as an acronym for *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya* ("Islamic Resistance Movement") as well as an Arabic word meaning "zeal." But unlike "Islamic Jihad," say, or "al-Qaeda," the name "Hamas" is not just an Arabic term or an English translation of one. It also happens to be a Hebrew word meaning "violence," among other things. . . .

In a twist that further complicates the issue, the Hebrew word that parallels the name of the Islamic terror group can itself be traced back to the Arabic. Etymologist Ernest Klein writes that the Hebrew *hamas* is linguistically linked to the Aramaic word *hamas* and the Arabic word *hamisa*, both meaning "was hard," as well as the Akkadian *hamasu*, meaning "to oppress."

Kordova further wrote that the question of meaning is profoundly pertinent to our particular *parashah*, adding: "*Hamas*, the Hebrew word, has been around since antediluvian times. In fact, it was one of the reasons God flooded the earth, according to Genesis."

She is right. And as we read of the flood again, the biblical response to *hamas* has suddenly revealed itself to be terribly salient.

As the weekly reading begins, the legacy of Cain dominates the earth, and few see life as God's inviolable gift:

And the earth became corrupt before the Lord; and the earth was filled with *hamas*. (Genesis 6:11)

What is the crime denoted by *hamas*? Commentators offer a variety of explanations, but what it connotes without question is a form of violence. As we have seen, in other Middle Eastern languages the word can mean



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“zeal,” or “oppression.” Here, these meanings merge; for then as now, there were those on earth reflecting a zeal for violence and oppression. Violence, *hamas*, fills the earth; we must take note that the Torah makes no mention of government or civil order of any kind. It gives us, as others have noted, an anarchic state of nature described by Thomas Hobbes in his work *Leviathan*:

[W]here every man is Enemy to every man, . . . wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, . . . which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.

The *hamas* is so egregious that God seeks the destruction of the world, saving only one man and his family, Noah. Thus the reading, at its opening, presents us with a question: how is it possible to have faith in humanity’s potential when something like *hamas* can exist?

Noah is instructed to build an ark to withstand the forthcoming flood. The world is washed away; Noah emerges from the ark and God’s relationship with humanity begins again. But the Almighty clearly understands that even some of Noah’s descendants will engage in evil, and he emphasizes to the surviving remnant of humanity that murder is a violation, that moral responsibility endures, and that punishment can be just:

Whosoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God He made man. (Genesis 9:6)

But if the Almighty envisions violence, if *hamas* will once again rear its ugly head, then is another flood not a certainty? God, counterintuitively, asserts the opposite. Noah is informed that lest we worry that sin will once again bring about a divinely decreed deluge, we need only look to the rainbow:

I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between Me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow is seen in the cloud, that I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. (Genesis 9:14–15)

The rainbow embodies God’s belief in the positive potential of humanity. This does not necessarily mean that it is created at this moment; the medieval sage known as Nahmanides argues that the rainbow was divinely repurposed, but is a natural phenomenon:

We have no choice but to believe the teachings of the Greeks, that the light of the sun interacting with the wet air produces the rainbow in result.

How does the rainbow represent God’s refusal to destroy the world, His reconciliation to existence? Nahmanides suggests that the symbolic aspect of the rainbow is not its color but its shape: we see a bow



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aiming *away* from the earth, signifying disarmament. But for me, Nahmanides' explanation fails to satisfy fully; surely the bow's brilliance is linked to the Almighty's explanation of why He, as it were, reconciled Himself to humanity's survival.

Let us, like Nahmanides, ponder the science. Isaac Newton revolutionized our understanding of how color emerges in the world. Judy Garland's claim in *The Wizard of Oz* notwithstanding, he taught us that there is no location "somewhere over the rainbow." Rather, positioning ourselves

with our backs to the sun allows us to see light in refracted form. Passing the rays of the sun through a prism, Newton illustrated that it is the disruption of light that allowed it to divide into distinct colors.

To some, this robbed the rainbow of its magic. In 1820, John Keats penned a poem that came to embody the age of Romanticism, with Newton its unspoken villain:

Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made . . .

The truth, however, is that science enhances the symbolism. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, precisely while Romanticism raged, suggested that an understanding of the rainbow allows us to understand why it reflects Divine reconciliation to humanity. As refracted (that is, divided) light produces a rainbow, so are we to intuit small sparks of the light of God within mankind, even in the darkest of times. That, he argues, is why God refuses to destroy the world once again.

Following this line of thought, we can suggest something more. The rainbow is only produced because of an opposition to the sunlight, which allows the ray to divide and refract. In the very confrontation between light and dark, the radiance of the rainbow is brought into being. Describing how the rainbow is born when light meets the resistance of the darkness of the cloud, the physicist Arthur Zajonc writes:

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[C]olors arise through the “scattering” of light. The turbid medium provides innumerable scattering centers, be they molecules in air or a glass prism. From them light is scattered. . . . Even the rainbow . . . can be understood in an analogous way. Where light meets darkness, colors flash into existence; . . . in Goethe’s language, “Colors are the deeds and sufferings of light,” the deeds and sufferings of light with darkness.

Without darkness there would be no rainbow: it is only in a world of both sun and cloud, of both light and dark, that its dazzling display is possible. The symbolism can now be understood: through the emergence of the rainbow in the midst of the cloud, God communicates that despite the human propensity for sin, the world will not be destroyed again. The rainbow embodies the human capacity for heroism. When light contends with darkness, the rays of color emerge; and the very moral darkness inherent in existence will serve as the springboard for moments of mankind’s moral luminance. Evil will still exist; God knows that a resurgence of *hamas* is certain. But the battle between light and darkness will be joined; and it remains the case that “where light meets darkness, colors flash into existence.”

In the midst of pagan immorality there will rise an Abraham, in the midst of tyranny Moses will make his stand, and in opposition to a genocidal Amalekite there will arise an Esther. It is in heroism that the radiance of sanctity is to be found, vindicating God’s allowing us to endure. The Jewish moral and political vision can thus never be utopian, for it acknowledges mankind’s powerful capacity for evil; but it cannot despair, for it never gives up hope in heroism and its powerful potential.

But if God still has faith in humanity, it is not clear that Noah does. Exiting the ark, his first endeavor is drunkenness:

Noah, tiller of soil, was first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and was drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent, . . . (Genesis 9:22)

Why does Noah drink? Perhaps because he has experienced the rampage of *hamas* and then the death of the entire world, and so he engages in escapism. Noah’s son Ham mocks his father, but two other sons show reverence, with Shem leading the way:

But Shem and Japheth took a cloth, placed it on their backs, walked backward, and covered their father’s nakedness. (Genesis 9:23).

Thus, for the Torah, Shem—Abraham’s ancestor—embodies familial loyalty and love. It is striking, as I have noted in *Mosaic*, that even as wine’s first appearance in the Bible is a negative one, Judaism embraces wine for celebration of the familial dedication and reverence for the faith of one’s ancestors embodied by Shem: *kiddush* on the Sabbath, the four cups of the seder, and marking the sanctity of the holidays with the toast *l’chaim*—“to life.” It thereby signifies that it rejects Noah’s despair and embraces life with hope. It is terribly poignant, therefore, that on just such a celebration this year, *Simchat Torah*, a terrible *hamas* made itself manifest—one



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named Hamas. Our sanctification of life is seen by our enemies as a weakness; in an interview this week, a Hamas official argued:

The Israelis are known to love life. We, on the other hand, sacrifice ourselves. We consider our dead to be martyrs.

He was indeed correct that Jews love life, but what he misses is that is a source of resiliency and unity. And that is what we have seen again and again over these past weeks: brilliant moments of light refracting against the devastating darkness. One of my favorite stories described a couple married last Monday, Maor and Gal Peretz. With war at hand, the wedding hall they had booked was no longer an option, and a hurried wedding was put together in the backyard of their neighbor, Yossi Zer, even as six of his eight children had themselves gone into battle. Then, in an only-in-Israel moment, the most famous singer in Israel, Ishay Ribo, attended the impromptu celebration. The *Times of Israel* reports:

Maor had already reported for duty, but his commander let him out for the wedding. “He asked and they said sure, just come back the next day,” said Zer.

Then, the groom’s mother was getting her hair done in nearby Kfar Adumim when she told her hairdresser about the wedding. He told her he would get Ribo to perform. And he did.

Ribo came and sang the song of the seder, usually sung in defiance and joy over wine:

For in every generation they rise up to destroy us, and God saves us from their hands.

Thus does a love of life serve as a source of strength.

Others, after Noah, also fear man’s capacity for violence, and they seek safety in a severe, all-encompassing government:

Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world. (Genesis 11:4)

This has been interpreted as a tyranny; for the builders of the tower, only without freedom of movement and expression can the antediluvian violence be prevented. But God is Himself unenthusiastic, and causes the tower’s builders to cease communicating with each other. The political message, for the philosopher Daniel Elazar, is clear:

God’s response to the Tower of Babel suggests the decisive biblical rejection of the world-state as a single entity. At no point does the Bible diverge from this position.

The Bible, in other words, is not interested in the vision of John Lennon’s lyrics:



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Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us, only sky.

Imagine all the people
Livin' for today

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do.
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too.

The celebrated song is a calumny; it implies that religion is only about death, whereas the biblical vision celebrates life. It envisions a world without countries, but we Jews know that this will exist only in a state of antediluvian anarchy or Babylonian tyranny: Lennon will lead to Lenin.

As mankind scatters, the Lord of the earth is forgotten, but we are introduced, at the end of the reading, to one man following his father across Mesopotamia. Abram, like his ancestor Shem, clearly reveres his father; and as we will learn, he has come to know the God of Scripture in an age when few others have. And as we will learn, his driving dream is to have a child.

The message of our *parashah* is thus that this is a world of darkness, a world of *hamas* and of Babel; history includes anarchic, animalistic violence and totalitarian tyranny. The Jew, the descendent of Shem and Abraham, has long stood against both, cherishing family and nationhood while proclaiming the sanctity of human life and its reflection of the Divine image, heroically illustrating that where light faces darkness we find suddenly reflections and refractions of the human spirit.

The horrific news of the past week included what occurred at a kibbutz named Be'eri, where even babies were slaughtered. In the midst of the rampant despair, I was struck by one radiant online announcement featuring a picture of a beautiful baby girl. It read:

In the shadow of the sirens and rockets, a sweet baby girl was born yesterday in the South. The parents chose to call her Be'eri.

They thereby ensured that what was known for violence and death will be forever affiliated with love, life, and light, reflecting a spirit that is a veritable rainbow of resiliency.



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In Israel, the moral capacity of mankind reflected itself as Jews in the Middle East face a ‘Hamas’ that has once again made itself manifest here on earth.

This has indeed been a dark week. But light has met darkness. In the face of darkness descending, the light in Israeli society reflected and refracted itself in a dazzling display. In Israel, the moral capacity of mankind reflected itself as Jews in the Middle East face a *hamas* that has once again made itself manifest here on earth. And seeing one small nation

standing against this *hamas* in the midst of the darkness, moral radiance was revealed in a stirring display.

These days have indeed been dark, but also illuminating, for where heroic light meets darkness, radiance flashes into existence, revealing astonishing moral beacons that will light our path forward for years to come.

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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.



Additional Resources

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik on the Rainbow, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*.

How does the rainbow symbolize the covenant between God and man that ensures humanity's survival on earth? The rainbow appears because of the refraction and reflection of the rays of the sun in the droplets of water contained in the clouds. I believe that the arc of multicolored light in the midst of a dark cloud symbolizes the luminous endowment of a lowly, obscure, absurd creature like man that reflects the supranatural light emanated by the Creator. God stands opposite man, even as the sun is opposite the cloud. He makes man susceptible to the educational gesture and guarantees his eventual rise from a brutish existence to a redeemed life. God does not want to exterminate mankind and all the other living creatures, because in spite of his remoteness from God, man is capable of redeeming himself through a slow ascent to the Almighty... The act of redemption is dependent on the free will of man, exercised through his effort to develop the aptitudes and talents with which he has been blessed.

On Wine and "*L'Chaim*," "The Function of Wine at the Passover Seder," Mosaic, March 22, 2021.

[Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on the Tower of Babel and Tyranny, "On Freedom: The Sir Isaiah Berlin Memorial Lecture," June 16, 2003. [Click here to read.](#)

Meir Soloveichik on the Tower of Babel and Nuremberg, "Nuremberg, 75 Years After," Commentary, December 2020. [Click here to read.](#)

