

## Two Nations in Your Womb

Rabbi Jaclyn Cohen

Sermon - November 17, 2023 - Toldot

*Dedicated to Peace Activist Vivian Silver z"l.*

I want to begin my words tonight with two things: first - a trigger warning. What I'm going to share is not easy to hear, so please be mindful of more sensitive or young(er) ears.

And second: I want to offer an apology.

I know that's a strange way to start a sermon - especially one not being delivered on Yom Kippur.

But ... I'm sorry. Truly. And I want to explain *why*.

These past six weeks I've been in a fog. A thick, hazy *stew* of existential dread and disbelief ... preventing me, at times, from saying things I probably should've said & doing things I probably should've done.

Since October 7th I've been in this ... state ... of emotional paralysis - which, I know, is completely normal for human beings dealing with very hard things.

Yes, I know I've done my best. I've shown up, I've listened, I've comforted, preached and taught Torah. And believe me, I know none of you expect us clergy to be perfect - I do.

But so many moments over these last six weeks I feel like I've been ... elsewhere.

So, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all the moments when I couldn't find the words, or when I fumbled what was, in hindsight, a well-thought-out statement. Moments where I held back when I should have pushed forward or when I pushed too hard instead of falling back.

For all these shortcomings, dear community: forgive me, pardon me, grant me atonement.

This fog, this *heaviness* is unlike anything I've ever experienced. It's put me in a near-constant state of discomfort. It's made me slightly paranoid and particularly vigilant. It's filled me with fear, uncertainty, and worry. It's disrupted my life, torn my focus to shreds and morphed me into a different version of myself than the one I knew on October 6.

*This* is what trauma does to us. This is the *imprint* of *terrorism* upon our souls.

And most of us ... have never been through a *trauma* quite like this.

This past week, something broke through my fog. And I wish I could tell you it was the sight of nearly 300,000 people on the National Mall in DC, standing in *support* of Israel and *against* antisemitism and hate.

That was - admittedly - pretty cool.

No.

What broke through my fog this week was news that Vivian Silver, an Israeli-Canadian *peace* activist who'd lived for decades on Kibbutz Be'eri, a woman believed to be taken to Gaza as a hostage, had not only been *murdered* on October 7, but incinerated to the point that it took *five weeks* to identify her remains.

To be clear - I did not know Vivian Silver of blessed memory. I knew *of* her, and I learned more about the organization with which she was involved, **Women Wage Peace**, in the days immediately following the Simchat Torah Massacre. I read she was involved in *several* organizations promoting communication and collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians. I learned she was a board member for the human rights group *B'tzelem*, that she fought for gender equality in *kibbutzim*, and she

volunteered with Road to Recovery, driving patients from Gaza to hospitals in Israel.<sup>1</sup>

Something *broke* in me this week, learning that Vivian Silver, a force of nature ***committed*** to building a better future in the Middle East ... had been brutally murdered by Hamas terrorists. That she was ***not*** - as a friend and I both fantasized - preaching ***peace*** to her captors inside a tunnel somewhere in Gaza. That her activism, her audacious desire to bring forth a better future ... had been violently cut short. Vivian's determination to *fight* for the ***dignity*** of Palestinians did ***not*** matter to Hamas nearly as much ... as the fact that she was a Jew.

As I absorbed the news ... the fog lifted ... and slowly, the faces of 200+ hostages came into sharper focus. Innocent human beings - men, women, ***children*** - a handful younger than my own two, beautiful sons! - held captive by these barbaric, bloodthirsty evildoers.

Had I not ... fully ***absorbed*** the hostages' plight before this?

The fog lifted ... and slowly, the magnitude of destruction in Israel's south came into view: a place where so many progressive, coalition-building folks built lives and livelihoods. Bodies broken, raped and violated in unimaginable ways. Entire families, communities, peace-preaching souls ***annihilated*** in a pogrom.

Had I not ... fully ***heard*** these descriptions of the heinous, violent nature of their abuse and murder before this?

The fog lifted ... and before me stretched the full magnitude of destruction in ***Gaza*** ... So many innocent humans stuck inside a nightmare, living under the rule of a terrorist regime, their futures in peril ***long*** before this. How many were laid to rest by their own "leaders" tasked with keeping them "safe?" And how many were laid to rest by the Israeli Defense Force in its ***legitimate*** pursuit of Hamas?

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.heyalma.com/may-jewish-peace-activist-vivian-silvers-memory-be-for-a-revolution/>

Had I been ... shamefully naive? Had I been so ignorant, so stuck in a reality of my own creation I'd not fully understood how tragic the Israeli-Palestinian dynamic has ***always*** been ... long before October 7?

Certainly, I'm not new to this subject. In college I majored not in ***Jewish*** Studies but in ***Religious*** Studies. In seminary I participated in a transformative ***Muslim/Jewish*** fellowship called "NewGround." The same year I married Josh, I visited the West Bank for the first time, meeting and learning with extraordinary humans doing extraordinary work. I even ***authored*** a massive curriculum on Jewish identity formation through interfaith learning. A whole section of my bookcase is devoted to the ***resources*** I used for that project; office shelves filled with insights on the faith and cultural practices of others.

All this time - have I been a ***fool***? (pause)

As I often do when things feel bleak, I turned to Torah. In this week's *parsha*, *Toldot*, Rebecca - wife of Isaac - struggles through her pregnancy with twins Jacob and Esau. She reaches out to God for guidance and God responds:

***Two peoples are in your womb;***  
***Two nations shall branch off from each other [as they emerge from you]***  
***One people shall prevail over the other;***  
***The elder shall serve the younger.***

Two brothers. Side by side. Destined to live distinct yet parallel lives.

Before we go any further, no - there isn't commonly-accepted evidence of Esau's descendants becoming what we identify as modern-day Palestinians. Though in the final line of the *parsha* we learn that Esau goes to Ishmael, his uncle, to marry one of Ishmael's daughters.

And yes - I *am* uncomfortable with the description that one people shall "prevail" over the other, and that Esau (the elder) shall serve the younger, Jacob.

But ... for the sake of this sermon: two peoples. Two nations. Two very different brothers born of the same womb ... growing up side by side ... eternally tasked with navigating a family legacy of disruption and dysfunction.

Did Jacob and Esau - or their descendants - have hope? Did these brothers and their offspring *hate* one another with such a passion that it led to murder? Did this family ever believe peace was possible? Was it Jacob and Esau who laid the groundwork for a dispute thousands of years later over the question, *who is "indigenous" to this sacred land?*

Not necessarily.

But for the sake of this sermon I want to imagine that Jacob and Esau offer us a framework through which we can view this current, devastating chapter in an ages-old, devastating conflict.

A few chapters from now, Jacob and Esau prepare to reunite after many years apart. Jacob learns that Esau is accompanied by four hundred men and he *panics*, terrified his brother will attack him and his family. But when they meet, first Jacob bows to the ground seven times as he approaches his brother. And then Esau runs to meet him, embraces him, kisses him on his neck ... and the brothers burst into tears. And they - seemingly - share acceptance and affirmation with one another, each one having found and settled into his respective destiny. (pause)

When a fog lifts, what is it we behold in its absence?

No, I don't believe we are headed for a reconciliation between "brothers" anytime *soon*. The trauma is so raw, and so present, and this rampant and dangerous surge of antisemitism in the United States alone is so horrendous and terrifying. We are all on high alert - rightfully so - and in times when we feel so close to the burning flame, some days all we can do is pray for the heat to die down quickly.

Eventually - God willing, soon - this war will end. And eventually - God willing, soon - people of conscience and character, Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and

non-Jews the world over, will begin to put the pieces back together ... even if we can't identify for a long, long time what it is we're building.

If there is *one* thing we can do to honor the memory of Vivian Silver and hundreds of others like her who were killed that horrible day and the days that followed, it is this: **we can choose not to let her vision die with her.**

Vivian's son Yonatan recently shared with the media that, for years and years his mother would tell him peace could come tomorrow; he would respond that she was beating a dead horse. And yet, amidst his grief this week he shared this: "*I now have her optimism. It feels like a relay race; she passed something onto me ... I don't know what [I'm going to do with it] but I think we can't go back [to how things were]. We need to create something new — more in the direction of what she was looking for.*"

In a separate interview this week, a man named Rami Elhanan - with whom my rabbinical school classmates and I met and learned many years ago in Jerusalem - shared his story and perspective. Rami belongs to something called "**The Parents Circle Families Forum**," a joint Israeli-Palestinian organization of over 600 families, all of whom have lost an immediate family member to the ongoing conflict. Rami lost his teenage daughter, Smadar, to a suicide bomber in September 1997. The organization promotes the idea that a process of *reconciliation between nations* is a prerequisite to achieving a *sustainable* peace.

Rami shared: "... *We [have been] in a circle of blood for the last 75 years and this is just another round. Nobody expected the viciousness and the cruelty of this round, but it was expected ... [and] it will not stop unless we **talk** ... we are **doomed** to live here together and we have to choose ... whether to share this land or to share the graveyard under it.*"

Friends, I don't know what comes next. So much feels uncertain, broken beyond repair. Just like you, there are moments when I am shaken to my core by the toxicity, the vitriol, the threats, the violence. Just like you, there are days when it feels like my hope and optimism have been extinguished.

But then there are other days. Days when that little glimmer of faith perks up as if to say - *all is not lost*. Days when I look around at all we DO have, when the voices of our allies and unexpected partners lighten that heavy load just a little. Days when I remember the increasing number of people, organizations and initiatives working to bring about a better future for Israelis and Palestinians. May they continue to safely grow and thrive.

Days when I look to Torah and *listen*, really listen, to the timeless lessons it contains for us, all these years later.

Days when I remember what I love - and treasure - about my Jewishness.

Days when I remember the only way to make it through this “*one wild and precious life*” is with empathy and compromise.

Days when I rediscover the prayers I have always known: prayers for peace, for reconciliation, for gratitude and grace.

And my hope and prayer for us tonight, dear community, is that our days of peace begin to multiply. That our courage and fortitude only grow. That our individual brokenness becomes a collective mosaic; a tapestry of possibility for “[the creation] of something new,” as Vivian’s son Yonatan described.

Two nations in your womb.

May these nations know *peace*.

Shabbat Shalom.

**Additional Resources:**

**The Parents Circle Families Forum:**

<https://www.theparentscircle.org/en/pcff-home-page-en/>

**Women Wage Peace:** <https://www.womenwagepeace.org.il/en/>

**NewGround: A Muslim/Jewish Partnership for Change:**

<https://mjnewground.org/>