



Rabbi Ammi Hirsch

Show Up!

A week after Hamas massacred more than 1,000 Israeli civilians, "we gather for Shabbat on the day that Hamas has termed 'A Day of Rage,'" says Rabbi Ammi Hirsch. "These rally-goers are not supporting peace. They are not supporting Palestinian rights. They are supporting a Nazi philosophy of exterminating Jews." So what can we do? "Show up," he says. "Hold everyone accountable. Insist on moral clarity..."

Video of this speech is available here: <https://swfs.org/sermons/show-up/>

By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, Senior Rabbi at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue

We gather on this, the first Shabbat after October 7 - a day that will live in infamy - still in shock, in deep mourning, and fearful for the weeks to come. We gather today to find comfort and consolation in and through each other. There have been many moments, dear friends, during this painful week that you have comforted me and lifted my spirits, just by being here.

We gather for Shabbat on the day that Hamas has termed "A Day of Rage." It is a call heeded by tens of thousands of Hamas supporters on the streets of the West and on university campuses. It is a call to demonstrate support for Hamas' nihilist philosophy and savage methodology - and perceived by many of its supporters worldwide as a day of violence primarily against Jews, Jewish institutions and Israelis abroad. This is certainly how American security officials understand its aims. Our synagogue, alone, has invested enormous resources of time, talent and treasure to protect our safety and security. We thank the New York City Police Department, and all those in federal, state, and local government who work round-the-clock to protect the Jewish community.

I am grateful to you for simply showing up today. It is important for Jews, and all good people, to show up now. Showing up is one answer to the question, "What can I do?" Do not cower, do not quail, do not cringe. Do your part in this, the defining moral struggle of our times.

What are the rally-goers supporting on this day of rage? What is their message?

Many of their posters include pictures of paragliders, demonstrating their support and enthusiasm for the butchers of Hamas who flew over the fence to murder Jews in their homes, in their beds, and in shelters. In many cases, unable to break down the doors of the safe rooms where entire families were hiding, the murderers burned down the house. Israelis died of fire and smoke; they were asphyxiated in their small chambers like their ancestors in Europe eighty years ago. Some of those terrorists previously worked in the kibbutzim and farming communities they attacked. They knew where every family lived; they knew their names, they knew the parents, the grandparents and the children. They may have played with the children they murdered and mutilated.

Some of the murdered were peace activists. I have met many of them. They maintained dialogue with Gazans throughout all these years. They brought them supplies. They waited for sick Palestinian children at the border crossings and drove them to Israeli hospitals, often paying for their specialized treatments.

Some of you have joined our missions to Europe. We visited Babi Yar in Ukraine, where 33,000 Jewish citizens of Kiev were marched into a steep ravine and gunned down. Our delegations stand over that ravine in silence, asking ourselves over and over again, how could this happen?

October 7, 2023, is how it happens. If these savages had the ability, they would have continued slaughtering Jews, rampaging through every Israeli village, town and city they could enter. The only reason that the death toll was 1,300 and not 33,000, is that the terrorists were thwarted by the most heroic acts of Israeli gallantry and courage. Many civilians and security personnel were laid to eternal rest this week whose heroic stories will be told for decades to come - unbelievable, unimaginable acts of bravery, self-sacrifice, mutual responsibility and love. Israelis now realize, and we should too, that this is a war of no choice, a war of survival. No one will be able to live in Israel if these savages are not eliminated. Would you?

What are the rally-goers supporting on this day of rage? What is their message? They are not supporting peace. They are not supporting Palestinian rights. They are supporting ISIS. They are supporting a Nazi philosophy of exterminating Jews. "Kill the Jews; gas the Jews" - these are slogans often heard at Palestinian days of rage. Sadly, tragically, the only way that the West defeated Nazi Germany, the only way we could defeat Milosevic, the only way we could defeat ISIS, was through military force, that cost the lives of many innocent civilians. On the highway to Berlin, our synagogue delegations speed by the city of Dresden, in southern Germany. It is an entirely new city. Everything was destroyed there by the US and Royal Air Forces in the campaign to defeat the Nazis. Only after the Nazis were defeated, could the rebuilding of Europe and the reintegration of Germany into the civilized nations of the West begin.

That many of our most cherished and senior educators do not see the insidious evil behind Hamas; that the people we have entrusted to instill in the next generation of Americans moral and civic values, tolerate anti-Jewish messages they would never tolerate against any other minority, is devastating to me. These are among the most elite of educational institutions, the pride and joy of American intellectual culture, and the training grounds for our future leaders. I know there are some misguided Jews who join, and even help organize, these rallies. Had they found themselves in southern Israel on October 7, they would not have been spared. No one would have asked them their views.

Come on: University presidents and administrators are acutely sensitive to - and comment on - every perceived micro-aggression on campus. They issue dramatic statements about Halloween costumes for God's sake. But they can't comment on mass murder and the evil, sick, deranged ideology behind it?

Why? Is it that they do not see it - the most intelligent people in the world - or are they cowards? Or perhaps, in their heart of hearts, are they sympathetic to these days of rage and what they represent?

We have learned over and over again in human history that there is no connection

between native intelligence and moral intelligence; that some of the most brilliant people in the history of the world, used their intelligence to support nefarious ends.

That so many religious leaders do not see the insidious evil behind Hamas; that the people who speak for God and higher values are blinded by false concepts and duplicitous rhetoric, is devastating for me. I know many of these religious leaders. I have sat with them and dialogued with them for years. Most of them are good people, honest people, sincerely committed to human virtue, but they seem to have a moral blind spot when it comes to Jews.

The moral rot that we have been warning about for years, that has already embedded itself in so many American universities and other institutions, is coming home to roost. We have, at most, one generation to stop it - and probably less. American Jews and so many other good people who are not Jews, have been asking all week, "What can I do to help?" This is one critical way. Practically all of us are alumnae of universities, or have children in universities, high schools and middle schools, or we support a whole range of charitable institutions. So many of us occupy senior positions in law firms, the media, and not-for-profit and for-profit organizations.

Hold everyone accountable. Insist on moral clarity. Flood the leaders of these institutions with your righteous indignation. Support those who are doing the right things and saying the right things. They are under extraordinary pressure. Do not relent. If the leaders of our academic institutions do not respond to your satisfaction, withhold your contributions, and redirect them to other, more morally clear and courageous institutions. Don't do it alone. Organize, join with others, Jewish and non-Jewish, who are equally appalled. Students: march, protest, march, write, march, organize, march and march and march.

So much more than Israel is at stake. It is our entire Western values system. It is the very principles that make the United States the indispensable nation - the last best hope of earth.

On this Shabbat, Jews worldwide begin reading the Torah anew, beginning again at the beginning. In the parsha of the week - Bereisheet - we read the story of Cain and Abel. Cain murdered Abel in a spasm of jealousy on a day of rage.

"Am I my brother's keeper?" he asks.

Once Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise - once they ate of the tree of knowledge of good and bad, of right and wrong, justice and evil - humanity was both blessed and burdened with choice. In Paradise, choice is unnecessary. But outside the Garden, we must make moral choices. Where there is choice, there is free will. And where there is free will, there is moral agency.

Choice is both a gift and a burden, both liberating and terrifying. Because to make the right choice, we must know ourselves. It is to know that within all of us is darkness and the capacity to kill. Destruction, hostility and aggression lurk within the human soul, ever-present since the moment God breathed into us the breath of life.

"Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain's question was sincere. How was he to know? Who taught him morality, to respect the life and dignity of his brother? Humanity had just begun. These were the only two brothers on earth.

The entire rest of the Bible, and everything - literally every word of the bottomless sea of post-biblical Jewish tradition - is dedicated to answering Cain's question. Yes, you are your brother's keeper. All of Judaism is devoted to helping the human creature climb out of the primordial moral swamp into which - we were born, and to pacify the destructive impulses of our nature: To tame the beast. We seek to express our ambitions, accomplishments, our aspiration for recognition and reward, without converting these into murder, degradation, persecution, exploitation and injustice.

Judaism is devoted to helping human beings clearly see their own transgressions, their own crimes. It is a mark of healing, of growing, of moral progress, when we recognize our own moral inadequacy. A good person recognizes the corruption in himself. The evil one does not.

To know that we have sinned is to fill us with shame. For this reason, we so often refuse to acknowledge responsibility. It is among the most difficult of human tasks: to look deep into our own souls and see darkness there. It is why we so often cover the nakedness of our crimes with the rhetorical fig leaves of freedom, honor, justice, faith, and resistance. "There is no vice so simple but assumes some mark of virtue on his outward parts." "An evil soul producing holy witness is like a villain with a smiling cheek. A goodly apple rotten at the heart."

To be my brother's keeper is hard enough. To be my own keeper is often unbearable. If a man can murder his fellows, calmly lopping off their heads, riddling with bullets and burning the bodies of babies - and he and his comrades consider that honorable duty in service of a higher end - God wants this of me - can any person on earth be safe from the darkness lurking within the human soul? The monsters hiding in the shadows of our nature always seek to climb out of the confinement our moral systems have imposed on them, to rampage across the moral terrain, destroying reason, community, fellowship, friendship, and life-itself.

Evil is rooted in human nature. But all is not lost. We know that goodness is also part of us. Along with the darkness, irrationality, ugliness and violence embedded in the human soul, the human creature is also "noble in reason, infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action, how like an angel, in apprehension, how like a god, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals."

Evil is never our destiny. We have a choice. Our choices make evil possible. But remember - it is also our choices that make love and goodness possible. A vision of glory and redemption - these too are innate in us.

"Here in this transport I Eve And Abel my son If you should see my older son Cain son of man Tell him that I..."

("Written in Pencil in the Sealed Freight Car," Don Pagis).