Light Them in Good Health (Crying on the Roof in Jerusalem)
Rosh Hashana 5786
Slakman

We typically associate Shabbat candlesticks with things like continuity, ritual beauty, and ancestral protection. But for years now, a pair of candlesticks that I have in my home evoke dread, shame, and confusion.

I vividly remember the day I acquired these small, silver figures– October 6, 2023, just after I had moved into my apartment, finishing my relocation to Washington, D.C. With all my belongings still in boxes, and Shabbat approaching, a friend of mine brought over her great grandmother's candlesticks for us to light together in my new home.

This person was not only someone I'd known well and loved deeply since childhood– neighborhood pool parties, Jewish summer camp, and community gatherings –but also someone whose family and mine had been connected for generations: our parents were friendly, our grandmothers before them too, decades of crossed paths and important shared spaces. We were both well aware that our views on Israel, Zionism, and Jewish identity had diverged, evidenced by the separate communities we frequented as adults, the literature we read, the protests we attended, even the signs and symbols displayed in our homes.

But we coexisted with that gap quietly present– until the day *after* she left her Shabbat candlesticks with me in my new home. October 7th made the space between us too raw to inhabit. So we didn't inhabit it. And the candlesticks started collecting dust amidst the chaos of late 2023.

Months turned into years.

Speak on a panel about listening across generational and ideological divides– put the candlesticks on a different shelf. Write an article about empathy and teshuva– move them into a closet, out of sight.

I avoided returning them, even after she reached out, even after she asked for them back: I was hurt that my family's lived experience did not shift her perspective; I was unwilling to face the painful truth that someone with whom I shared so much held tight to a different vision for the Jewish future– one that felt tangibly threatening and, in crucial ways, in direct contradiction to my own.

And also, I think– though I am not proud to admit it– because I didn't know how to find any other sense of control or self-protection in a time that felt so earth-shattering and vulnerable, when what had previously seemed unfathomable was suddenly unfolding.

Two years later, I am still trying to make sense of that feeling of helplessness.

Those first days spent witnessing, collecting, and internalizing impossible images and realities I could previously have only conjured in nightmares.

Who by fire and who by water– Jews murdered and tortured in ways that, until October 7th, belonged to a time of Jewish danger we hoped was long past.

Who by fire and who by water: Inquisition, pogroms, Shoah– violence and danger deeply engraved into our psyche.

Who by fire and who by water, who by strangling and who by stoning. Since then, the wounds of October 7 have been deepened by people all over the world– from the hunting of Israeli civilians on the streets of Amsterdam to the shooting of a young couple outside the Jewish museum in our own city. "No Jews allowed," social media comments multiplying by the billions, shouts from thought leaders and public figures piling on– "Jews will not replace us," "Death to Israel," "pigs," "thieves," "white-supremacist colonizers," "globalists," "puppet masters."

Who shall be uplifted and who shall be brought low. Has it been here all along? Is it our fault this time? Are we alone in this world? How do we survive? Who would hide us? How do we defend ourselves? How do we speak to hate? What can we say, what can we do? It is all still here.

I wasn't alive for the Yom Kippur War, and until October 7th I don't think I could have begun to imagine the sinking dread the Jewish world must have felt that day.

Only six years earlier, the Six-Day War had seemed to remake Jewish history– a breathtaking, unprecedented victory which convinced many that a new chapter of the Jewish story had begun, that the old terrors had finally been put to rest.

And then, on the holiest day of the year, the sirens wailed again. As the poet Haim Gouri later wrote, the sirens were not only a call to arms, but the cry of "an existential threat," announcing the return of "Jewish existential fear … which the Land of Israel evidently did not exempt us from … of life on the verge of being ended."

Even in the land that all of our Jewish texts dream of, long for, and point to– sovereignty has brought us many things. But one thing it has not brought us is an end to the vulnerability we know so well– from centuries of exile, persecution, and trauma.

Our exposure lives on. And as the days, weeks, and years pass since the Yom Kippur war, since October 7th– since whenever you want to start counting– our vulnerability expands and takes on new shapes and forms.

Who by sword and who by beast– I am not the victim at this moment, and yet the feeling of desperation, horror, and shame at witnessing a city and its people destroyed– besieged on all sides, starving– eats away at me. And I feel helpless knowing that the hostages– who might as well have been me– seem abandoned.

Israel: The only Jewish state in the world.

Israel: The country that saved my own family's life and liberty.

Israel: The only place I have visited since October 7 where I haven't seen "Death to Jews" scrawled in plain sight somewhere. It is the same state where, in an interview with Ezra Klein, Ari Shavit said: "Our revenge will be to live, to bring children, to bring life. We came from death, we are surrounded by death, but we choose life."

And yet: Israel is now overcome by corrupt leaders driving the government, eroded by extreme religious ideology, and dark fundamentalism. Doing things we will have to reckon with for generations.

I don't know how to stop it– what to say or do, how to understand it, or even how to accept that this is where we are. *Who are we? Did we do enough? How do we live with ourselves? Who by fire and who by water? Who by hunger and who by thirst*– Salem, al-Agha, Abu Najeas, members from every living generation of Palestinian families, killed. Who among them could have been our next peace partners and progress makers?

The images and testimonies that continue to emerge from Gaza and the West Bank are impossible to process, and two years since the war began, by far Israel's longest-ever war, it is clear that what started as a military response to the cruelty of October 7th has morphed into something else, hidden behind slogans like "Together We Will Win" and goals detached from any big picture, like "eliminate Hamas" or "total security control." As Rabbi Zach Truboff wrote in a piece titled *The Endless Cruelty of War*: "Each new slogan offers the illusion of direction, while evading the question that refuses to disappear: What comes next, and who will bear its cost?"

It is not only our bodies that remain vulnerable but our souls as well.

In that same article, Rabbi Truboff suggests that we can learn what war does to the soul by examining the judgment God rendered upon King David in the Book of Chronicles. We read that God tells David he has shed much blood on earth and waged many wars; therefore, he is not permitted to build a house for God's (the Temple). Commentators note that, despite the harshness of God's decree, David is mostly depicted as defending his people against those who truly seek to destroy them. Yet any violence, even violence that might be deemed righteous or necessary, can have an impact on a person's soul because it brings forth what Rambam calls the *middah* of akhzariyut– the attribute of cruelty. Rabbi Truboff describes this attribute as "a necessary desensitization to the image of God in the human other, without which one cannot survive the battlefield.

The Hebrew word for cruelty (*akhzariyut*) itself conceals this truth: *ach zar*– 'my brother is a stranger to me.' Cruelty alienates us from seeing the other as bearing the divine image, and that is why it is incompatible with building a home for the divine presence in this world."

Rabbi Truboff concludes "We think we can wall off the battlefield from the home front. We think soldiers alone bear the burden. But cruelty crosses every line. It spreads throughout every corner of society, seeping into politics, media, and even religious language."

The spread of cruelty and the atmosphere of war certainly hangs heavy over us in this country, too– where division and fear are sown by the loudest, most powerful, most public voices, and, increasingly, by armies of algorithmically amplified six-second sound bites, or anonymous whispers across online communities the size of small countries: In this country, where political violence grows and takes new shapes; where voices are being censored and silenced, where the freedom to speak feels more and more precarious by the day; in this country, where there are literal masses of military uniforms patrolling our own city, our home; in this country, under the shadow of ICE raids and deportations. How much worse it is for anyone whose accent, skin color, or faith marks them an other. I could go on.

The spread of cruelty and the atmosphere of war hangs heavy over Israel too. I've spoken and written about the memorial stickers for people who died on and since 10/7– plastered everywhere. Train platforms, café walls, tourist sites, central bomb shelters, and small-town alleys– thousands and thousands of stickers: personal grief pressed into the stones of public life. While the designs, colors, shapes, and sizes vary, almost all the faces are young, and include a photo, name, and lifespan. Most carry a traditional Jewish mourning phrase– either "May their memory be a blessing" (ז״ל), or a phrase perhaps less familiar, used specifically when a person is murdered: "May God avenge their blood" (הי״ד).

Adding to the shock of so many vibrant young faces morbidly turned into a backdrop of collective longing are the subtle ways in which people are anonymously editing, and defacing these memorial markers. I noticed, more than once, sharpie scratches– "May their memory be a blessing" crossed out and

replaced in haphazard handwriting with “May God avenge their blood.” And the other way around.

The differences that had been festering beneath a thin layer of proscribed security have surfaced, and we now find ourselves in a time when even the most basic human act of marking death is contested publicly. A time in which grief, rage, trauma, and fear drive us into alternate realities so unspeakable that we are left stranded on opposite sides of the same unfathomable loss.

There is no space to grieve, only space growing between us.

This summer, I found myself weeping as I sat on my parents’ Jerusalem rooftop, above the city’s streets and alleys. Below me: layers of beige stone and red roof– the textured backdrop of infinite Jewish history, creativity, and expression.

From the streets rose melodies and the scents of Shabbat– Syrian, Persian, Iraqi, Ashkenazi, Bukharan, Beta Israel– lingering, mixing, drifting up to my ears and nose. On one rooftop nearby, Orthodox neighbors prayed with fervor; on another, a circle of women moved through yoga poses. The air, the sunlight, the laughter, and the fragile hope of the Jewish state, hovering gently, in the warm Jerusalem sky.

I found myself weeping, also, beneath the apartments, balconies, and storefronts, on Tisha B’Av– the day set aside to commemorate and reflect on the long history of destruction experienced by the Jewish people. As I sat on the ground, as is traditional on Tisha B’av, absorbing a reading of Eicha (Lamentations)– the text that centers Jerusalem’s fall and the destruction of the Temple, I found myself drawn beyond the devastation itself to the story that led there: the choices and fractures that paved the way, and how they might speak to this moment in time.

Much of what we know about the last days of Jerusalem before its fall comes from the historian Josephus, who, in *The Jewish War*, recorded the city’s descent into chaos. Only a few years earlier, Jerusalem had been thriving– its markets busy, its courts and study halls alive, the Temple gleaming at the city’s heart. But by the late 60s CE, Roman rule over Judea had become unbearable: heavy taxation, corruption, the desecration of Jewish customs, massacres of protestors, and more.

After years of sporadic uprisings, a full revolt against Rome broke out, and Jerusalem filled with rival factions– from the Zealots to the priestly leaders, to the moderates– each fighting for a different vision of the future. As Roman legions advanced, internal strife only grew, and militias battled inside the city as the empire's armies gathered outside its walls.

While some believed that unyielding resistance against Roman rule was the only way to preserve freedom, others thought that negotiating with the Romans could prevent unnecessary bloodshed.

While some advocated for the use of violent force, others argued that such violence would only perpetuate further harm. To some, the holy places were worth dying for; to others, their holiness depended on staying free from war, even if that meant letting them go. Some saw rebellion as a moral duty, while others thought that finding a way to survive, even if it meant compromise or humiliation, was the better path.

"It's not too late," I imagine them telling themselves, even as rebel factions turned on one another, Jews distrusting Jews.

"It's not too late," they thought, as strife among the Zealots drove away crucial support from the broader community.

Even as they sensed their options narrowing, they pressed on.

"It's not too late," they might have said, as they set fire to their own food stores, hoping to ignite fiercer resistance, only to bring starvation upon their own people.

When Titus, the Roman general leading the campaign, learned of the chaos inside Jerusalem's walls, he swore he bore no blame. He insisted he had offered the people peace if they surrendered, but it was they who had chosen violence and war. It was they alone, he claimed, who had brought famine upon themselves. We know what happened next: Roman forces breached the city, slaughtered its inhabitants, and set the Temple aflame– the sanctuary reduced to ashes, and Jerusalem left in ruins. It was too late.

Of course, the destruction of the Temple on Tisha B'Av is not the end of the Jewish story. But it stands as a painful testimony and yearly reminder that fear, despair, and rivalry can erode judgment; that reckless certainty blinds us; that we can not turn away from suffering and resist the hard work of moral reckoning. And that our actions can hasten the very devastation we dread.

Our bodies and inner lives are always vulnerable– even in moments that seem solid and enduring, like when the Temple stood at the center of Jewish life in Jerusalem, the unthinkable can still become real. That truth doesn't call us to stop defending ourselves, protesting injustice, or resisting forces of destruction.

Rather, it presses us to ask: **what will we do with our vulnerability– the exposure, uncertainty, trauma, and pain that persist? Will we allow it to consume us, or can we turn it toward a deeper purpose?**

In his essay *An Artist's Struggle for Integrity,* James Baldwin speaks to this possibility. He writes:

> "You are compelled, you are corralled, you are bullwhipped into dealing with whatever it is that hurt you. BUT what is crucial here is that if it hurts you, you must find some way of using this to connect you with everyone else alive. This is all you have to do with it. You must understand that your pain is trivial except insofar as you can use it to connect with other people's pain; and insofar as you can do that with your pain, you can be released from it, and then hopefully it works the other way around too; insofar as I can tell you what it is to suffer, perhaps I can help you to suffer less."

Our bodies and souls remain exposed– if it hurts you, you must find some way of using this to connect you with everyone else alive.

Who by fire and who by water– how terrifying it is to be vulnerable. How impossible. Yet here we are. Our rituals ensure that we never confront the religious truth of human fragility alone. Together, shoulder to shoulder, we carry the uncertainty of our individual existences, and live in the truth that our fates are intertwined.

Held by the collective, we steady one another as we grapple with the mysterious, terrifying, painful, and beautiful facts of life and loss. Our bodies are fragile, and we allow this shared truth to draw us closer.

Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, side by side, we remember that imperfection and causing harm are not private failures but a shared truth of being human. Our souls are vulnerable, so we speak the hard parts out loud, confronting ourselves intentionally and repeatedly. And we do it together, beating our chests in unison, helping one another carry our heaviest weights, while offering the quiet certainty that even with our flaws, we belong. As our pain and regrets are witnessed and shared, and as we share the pain and regret of others, maybe the grip of shame can begin to loosen.

In the embrace of community, through finding the courage to face even the darkest parts of ourselves, maybe we invite in empathy, patience, and a resolve to repair and live with greater care.

Chatanu Lefanecha, rachem aleinu– we have sinned before You; have mercy on us. When cruelty wears the mask of righteousness and creeps into the mainstream; when our wounds are torn open and we are raw with triggers; when the hatred we face is not only familiar but painfully present and unrelenting; when our mirrors have been violently cracked– what does it take to still examine ourselves? With honesty, with patience, with an eye toward the ways our vulnerability might bind us to everyone else alive.

What must we nurture, as individuals and as a people, so we can turn to one another and trust each other to reflect back the deeper purpose that lives beneath the brokenness?

In an atmosphere charged with fear, how can we let ourselves be guided by hope and empathy– not to erase, but to soften, even slightly, the harshness of the decree.

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Hi. I left the candlesticks in the little hanging plant holder by your door.

Hi. I circled the block after I saw your text but I must've just missed you. I've worried about being able to hold it together when I see you again, if I'm being honest. Thank you for dropping them off, along with the candles. It made me emotional and it means a lot. I do miss you very much. And I hope you're alright.

I miss you too and feel relieved that those candlesticks are home. It took too long. I'm sorry. Light them in good health.

Happy new year.

I love you. Happy new year.