

Do Not Become What We Abhor
Exodus 32
 Hamas attacks on Israel
October 15, 2023
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Holy Nativity

This morning I claim no religious authority or faith-filled insight. Instead, I find myself reading, praying, reflecting, and writing so that I may come to understand a bit of what I may believe. If it would be helpful for you to listen in on my thoughts, please do.

It's a perilous, fraught time in our world. More chaotic than I can remember. I am struck by the seeming safety in which I find myself living. This sense of safety may be real or a tightly held illusion. Either way I am aware that I offer thoughts on the individual and systemic acts of violence in Israel and Gaza from a leather armchair in Michigan and not a stone house in the Middle East that may at any moment be shelled indiscriminately.

I have friends who know people who are missing in Israel. Who are walking around with the shadow of death, close by their side. I have colleagues who are wracked with anxious despair over what is likely to soon happen to their friends and loved ones in Gaza.

The blood lust of the Hamas terrorists and their actions taken last week in Israel is evil incarnate. The National Public Radio report of the attack on the Parallel Universe Techno Music Festival stands out for me.

The festival took place only miles from Gaza. (I don't know about you, but I needed to do a small refresher course on Gaza.) Here's what I learned: [Gaza is a small strip of land with the Mediterranean Sea on its West side, Israel on the North and East and Egypt to the South. It's small. About 25 miles long and at its widest, about 7 miles with approximately 2 million people living there. Fifty percent of the people are under the age of 19. Mostly the people who reside in Gaza live in poverty in refugee camps.

You may remember that prior to the end of WWI the Gaza Strip was part of the Ottoman Empire. After WWI Gaza became part of the League of Nations, under British rule. In 1947 on the eve of Israel being recognized by the UN, Gaza was allotted to the Arabs. The Arab-Israeli war began the day the British protectorate ended in 1948. Early in that fighting Egyptian forces took control. Gaza was under Egyptian military rule from 1949-1967. In 1967 in the course of the Six-day War Israel occupied the region for the next quarter of a century. In 1994 Israel began to transfer power to the Palestinian Authority under the Oslo accords. In 2000 a second intifada erupted with extensive fighting between Palestinians and Israelis.

In 2003 Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, in an attempt to end the fighting announced a plan to withdraw Israeli soldiers from Gaza. By 2005 Israel completed the pullout from the territory.

In 2006 the Palestinian Authority lost the parliamentary elections to Hamas. When Hamas, a known terrorist group, came into power, Israel, the US and the European Union imposed harsh sanctions on the people of Gaza. Hostilities and sanctions have continued since then. Elections have not been held in Gaza since Hamas took control.

This is a broad-brush background. Leaving out many, many details, because this is supposed to be a sermon not a history lesson or an inept geo-political analysis. I invite you to critique freely my offering and not be satisfied with its limited depth. But rather to read and research a great deal more so your opinions can be better far better informed.]

It is the Hamas attack on the music festival that is what most stands out to me in the midst of last week's horrific events.

A sign at the entrance of the festival read: The Supernova Universo Parallelo Festival, the Parallel Universe Festival— "The essence of unity and love in a breathtaking location" actually a breath stealing, death dealing location only a few miles from Israel's border with Gaza.

260 dead, many more missing— the single deadliest attack on civilians in Israel's history.

A Tik Tok video shows young people in tank tops dancing, when something strange starts descending from the sky—Hamas militants flying in on paragliders, others came across the border in pickup trucks.

Another video shows—people fleeing across a dusty field on foot—Gunman coming in trucks and surrounding a group of attendees and then firing. NPR interviewed a young man who hid with his girlfriend under the trucks pretending to be dead. The Hamas Terrorists shot at them—making sure they were dead. The young man survived; his girlfriend died.

Some from the festival were taken back to Gaza as hostages. No doubt to be used as human shields in the invasion to come. One festival goer, 'Omar' had a live location on his phone that his parents could track. They saw him enter Gaza—then nothing.

Some families, whose children have been taken hostage understandably say, "Gaza should be wiped out." Others say, "Revenge will not bring my daughter back. Something has to happen. Something different has to happen between these two people."

Social Commentator, University of Michigan educated, Ori Hanan Weisberg, who is now living in Jerusalem said,

"Systemic and historical analysis does not neutralize moral agency and responsibility. ..[When we fail to attend to either, we are part of the problem.]

He goes on to say:

"I'm angry that someone next to whom I sat Shabbat after Shabbat for years in synagogue went to a music festival, had his arm blown off with a grenade, applied his own tourniquet, and now is a hostage in Gaza with no medical attention to his grave injury. And his parents and sisters, like so many others, are living a nightmare."

“I’m angry that my own children’s immediate welfare and that of my people, and the immediate welfare of another people and its children, are now seemingly mutually exclusive.”

“I’m angry that I don’t currently possess a plausible vision for a better future.”

I’m angry...horrified and appalled.

And I am struck by today’s reading appointed from the Hebrew Scripture. The iconic story of Moses up on the mountain, spending way too much time with God. The people down below, at the base of Mt Sinai, grow restless and weary of waiting. So, they take gold and melt it down and form for themselves a calf. A golden calf and they decide to worship the calf—the fake God—because they are unable to see the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They have no idea where their leader Moses has disappeared. So, an idol will do, for they are desperate and in need of leadership.

Meanwhile God sees what God’s people are doing, and God is appalled. God says to Moses, go on down the mountain, let me be alone, for my wrath burns hot, and I will destroy these people.

But Moses says to God, (much along the lines what Abraham said to God,) “Why would you destroy these people? Why would you kill, destroy, and annihilate these people, for then others will say, that you God are evil. And that you brought these people out of Egypt only to kill them.

As mad as you are, as much as they deserve to die, you cannot become that which you abhor. You cannot become evil. You cannot become that which you abhor.

Moses said to the Lord God, “Remember the promises you made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob about their descendants being as numerous as the stars, remember those promises...and then God changed God’s mind. (Exodus 32:14)

In the midst of all that is happening in our world. Please, let us hold tight and hold fast. In the midst of all of our anger, terror and pain, let us not become that which we abhor.

This is my hope. This is my prayer.

Amen.