

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah
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Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

“Kol Dodi Dofek – Listen, my Beloved knocks...”¹

What do you think is the most important question a Jewish person ever asks? Maybe what’s the meaning of life? What is my fate and my destiny? What’s for lunch? All good questions – but not the most important Jewish question.

No – the most important question a Jewish person ever asks is: “What do we do now?” That’s it. That’s the fundamental Jewish question. What is our obligation, our duty, the right thing in this moment? Whatever the setting, whatever the context, whatever the circumstance, there is a Jewish answer to that question.

“When you see your enemy’s donkey lying fallen under it’s load, and you would hesitate to help him raise it, you must nevertheless help him raise it,”² teaches the Book of Exodus. “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ... you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger,”³ teaches the Book of Leviticus. “In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the shofar is sounded,”⁴ teaches the Book of Numbers.

That is the essence of what it means to live a Jewish life – trying to determine the right answer to the essential question: “What do we do now?”

There are situations when the answer to that question is simple and clear: when you find a lost object, you must endeavor to return it to its rightful owner.

And there are situations when the answer to that question is clouded and confusing: when someone’s home is invaded by a burglar, when is a person entitled to kill the invader?

In this morning’s Torah portion, the challenge facing Abraham is perhaps the most confounding. God says to Abraham: “Please, take your son, your only son, the one you

¹ The inspiration for the allusion to this phrase comes from an address in Yiddish titled “Kol Dodi Dofek” by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in May, 1956 – later expanded and rewritten in Hebrew in 1960

² Exodus 23:5

³ Leviticus 19:9-10

⁴ Numbers 29:1

love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.”⁵

Abraham has a choice to make: do I do what it sounds like God is asking of me and sacrifice my son? Do I raise my voice and resign in protest? What do I do now?

Implicit in this question is a fundamental idea: that there is an answer to that question. That there are things we should do, and things we shouldn't. Things we must do, and things we must not. There is good and there is bad. There is right and there is wrong.

But figuring out what is our moral obligation is hard. How do we know what's right?

The Song of Songs asks us to think of God as a lover, a suitor who comes in love to us, God's beloved, desiring nothing more than to live as one with us, wanting nothing more than for us to maximize the full experience of what it is to be human – mind, body, and spirit. “קול דודי דופק – *Kol Dodi Dofek* - listen, my beloved is knocking!”⁶

Kol Dodi Dofek – my beloved is knocking. God knocks on the doors of our conscience. God knocks on the doors of our hearts. God knocks on the door of our souls, begging us to answer, pleading with us to follow, to listen, to share in the bounty of God's transcendent wisdom, God's omniscient understanding. In the darkness of our confusion, God comes bearing light to help us see where we should go, to answer the question: What do we do now?

Sometimes in our arrogance, we refuse to answer the knock. We think we know all we need to know. In our reckless conceit, we tell ourselves we have nothing left to learn, that there is no complexity, no confusion, that despite our extremely limited capacity to understand, the truth we already possess is the only truth there is.

Sometimes in our fear, we refuse to answer the knock. We know somehow inside that the answer to our question is one we may not want to hear. What God asks of us may put us at odds with our community, with what everyone else is thinking or doing. It may require us to risk friendships, to risk the loss of work or status. It may require us to risk our very lives.

So what is Abraham to do?

More than anything, Abraham wants to do what's right. *Kol Dodi Dofek* – Abraham's beloved God is knocking. But what is it that God is really asking of him? On the one hand, the most fundamental ethical obligation of a father is to love and protect his son. There could be no more essential obligation for Abraham to follow than this.

⁵ Genesis 22:2

⁶ Song of Songs 5:2

But Abraham is consumed by what he believes is a higher calling than even the ethical. The charge he undertook as his life's work, to prove his unwavering faith in the ultimate loving goodness of the Creator of the Universe, was a mission he had to fulfill at any cost - even if it meant violating the greatest ethical dictate a human being can know. And so for Abraham, the ends justified the means.

But that's not what God wanted Abraham to learn. No. God did not desire Abraham to violate his ethical duty. Instead, God wanted to see if somewhere along the line, he would finally stand up and say, "This is my limit. This is the line I will not cross." Throughout the ordeal God was knocking, and Abraham couldn't hear it.

Dr. Tal Becker of the Shalom Hartman Institute teaches that there is a complex interaction between ends and means - between the goals we say we want to achieve and the people we become in order to achieve them. The goals are important - but who we are is also important. Sometimes we must choose to abandon a goal because of what it forces us to become in order to achieve it. And sometimes we decide the goal is so important that we need to stretch what is tolerable in order for us to achieve that goal.⁷

It has been 718 days since Hamas attacked Israel on Simchat Torah morning - October 7, 2023. On that awful day, thousands of terrorists and accomplices committed the most foul and barbaric of inhuman atrocities. They murdered the elderly and children in their cribs, parents in front of their children, children in front of their parents, young people cowering in shelters and running for their lives. They took more than 250 people hostage, including elderly women and infant children. They stole corpses of those they killed for ransom, dozens of which still have not been returned. As Ahmed Fouad Alkhatib, a resident senior fellow and head of Realign for Palestine at the Atlantic Council, described in a recent post: "Hamas's most wanted terrorists persistently, consistently, arrogantly, and insistently hide in schools, hospitals, tents, humanitarian zones, and any location where innocent and uninvolved civilians are located, to use them as human shields."⁸ Hamas' cynical, sinister strategy is to force Israel to fight them in the most challenging of circumstances, in order to maximize the suffering of the vulnerable civilian population for whom they are ultimately responsible.

What makes Hamas, and their sponsors in Iran and their allies in Hezbollah in Lebanon so evil and so dangerous is that there is no moral line they will not cross to achieve their aims, no matter the price they and others are made to suffer.

And faced with the threat of this fanatical enemy, Israel was and is compelled to act in self-defense. Maimonides teaches that: "When ... a person is pursuing someone with the intention of killing him - even if the pursuer is a minor - every Jewish person is

⁷ Tal Becker - "Torat Ha'adam (A Human Torah): Ends and Means in the Age of Uncertainty." Lecture at the Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, Israel - July 15, 2025

⁸ <https://x.com/afalkhatib/status/1965127510741442792>

commanded to attempt to save the person being pursued, even if it is necessary to kill the pursuer.”⁹

But tradition teaches there are limits and restrictions to what we may do to protect ourselves: Maimonides also teaches that: “When a person could prevent a murder or a rape by maiming the pursuer’s limbs, but did not take the trouble and instead saved the victim by killing the pursuer, he is regarded as one who shed blood and is liable for homicide.”¹⁰

Why do the rabbis concern themselves with these conversations? Why do they devote countless hours of debate and countless pages of comment and commentary to the moral and ethical quandaries and questions that universally impact our individual lives and experiences? Because across the ages, throughout our wandering through history, up to this very day, *Kol Dodi Dofek* – my beloved is knocking.

Isn’t that why we’re here today? Because the Holy One is knocking. Because as we open the chapter marked 5785 in the book of our lives, we look back at last year and see how we answered that question – what do we do now?

Looking inward, we see a ledger of deeds and misdeeds – places where our choices were aligned with the right and the good. And we look back at other moments and we see choices we shouldn’t have made and deeds we ought not have done.

Kol Dodi Dofek – my Beloved is knocking. God is knocking, constantly at our door, calling us to listen attentively, always and in every moment and circumstance, to do the next right thing.

We are here because we believe in wisdom – we believe there are truths to be discovered in the universe that will guide us toward the good and the right. We believe in a vision of holiness, of a world that is grounded in wisdom and understanding, in compassion and justice, in freedom and in peace. We yearn to return to the path of righteousness that will lead us to realize the world of our dreams, to relieve the world from suffering, from discord, from all that diminishes and demeans and destroys what is good in the world.

That we can discover that path is a miracle and blessing beyond measure. We are not condemned to a life devoid of meaning and purpose. We can choose to change the world as it is into the world that it could be, that it should be, that it ought to be. Our tradition teaches that we can grow our ability for insight and awareness, we can develop our capacity to understand – we can learn to lift our eyes to see; we can open our hearts to listen. *Kol Dodi Dofek* – my beloved is knocking. And we can choose to respond.

⁹ Mishneh Torah: Murder and the Preservation of Life 1:6

¹⁰ Ibid. 1:13

Rashi writes that when Isaac was bound upon the altar and his father wanted to slay him, at that very moment the heavens were opened, the ministering angels saw it and wept, and their tears flowed and fell upon Isaac's eyes which thus became dim.¹¹ The angels knew that Abraham's pursuit of his holy mission caused him to employ evil means. What God was trying to teach Abraham, was trying to teach us, is that the ends never justify the means. The means are the ends. More than achieving righteous goals, what God wants of us is simply to be righteous, to do the next right thing.

Doing the next right thing is not easy. The next right thing may require a spiritual and ethical fortitude that is hard to muster. The next right thing might be terrible and awful, even if it still is right. The next right thing may require extraordinary forbearance, self-restraint, and significant personal sacrifice. But that is our ethical duty. That is our moral obligation. *Kol Dodi Dofek* – my beloved is knocking.

Yossi Klein Halevi writes: "We know Israel's war against Iran and its proxies is unavoidable. We know any nation in our place would have reacted to Hamas's mass atrocities as we did. We know we face an enemy willing to commit any crime and that the IDF is fighting under conditions that would test the moral limits of any army. We know the young Israelis who have fought for months, many for nearly two years, are among the most heroic and self-sacrificing this country has produced. We know Israel is subject to a relentless campaign of lies, half-truths, distortions and convenient omissions. We know the outrageous accusation of genocide against Israel only diverts the world's focus from radical Islamism, the truly genocidal side in this conflict."¹²

But still, even with all the challenges we face, we cannot fall prey to the evil ideology of our enemies, in which we declare that righteous ends justify any means. Our answer to the evil of our enemies must never be to stoop to their level.

Kol Dodi Dofek – our beloved is knocking. It is essential that we answer the demand for moral accountability?

I love our tradition because of what it teaches and demands of us. I love that on Passover when recounting the plagues we remove wine from our cups, diminishing our symbol of joy, to teach us that our hearts must never be closed to the suffering of our enemies. I love that the book of Proverbs teaches "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; If he is thirsty, give him water to drink."¹³ I love that the IDF demands in its code of ethics: "The sanctity of life in the eyes of the IDF servicemen will find expression in all of their actions, ... and will exercise constant care to limit injury to life to the extent required to accomplish the mission."

¹¹ Rashi, Commentary to Genesis 27:1

¹² "Our Season of Reckoning: Israel's Moral Crossroads in Gaza" by Yossi Klein Halevi in The Times of Israel - <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/our-season-of-reckoning-israels-moral-crossroads-in-gaza/>

¹³ Proverbs 25:21

And I love that thousands of Israelis openly demand that Israel live by its values, that we do what is necessary to ensure that the innocent do not starve, that we minimize civilian casualties, that we reject the impulse to dehumanize our enemies, that we must confront and restrain the radical Jewish settlers who profane God's name through the terrorist activities they perpetrate against their defenseless Palestinian neighbors.

Tal Becker explains that we are the inheritors of *Torat HaAdam*, a Torah of humanity, a Torah that demands of us that we constantly answer God's loving call by always striving to be the best human companions the Holy One could ever want.

"The means," Becker teaches, "are the ends. ... We are the thing we do next! And what we do next shapes the character and the moral compass of the people we evolve to be."

Kol Dodi Dofek – listen my beloved knocks. And we answer today with the call of the shofar, the clarion call that rises from the depths of our souls to highest vaults of heaven, the call to do the next right thing. As the prophet Micah taught us centuries ago: "You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what God requires of you: Only to do justice, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God."¹⁴

¹⁴ Micah 6:8