



KOL NIDRE 5786/2025: Crossing to Holiness

Rabbi Andrea London

I'd like to tell you about Rabbi Yosef Blau. He's a distinguished 86-year-old Orthodox rabbi who now lives in Israel, but before he made *aliyah*/moved to Israel, he had an influential 48-year tenure at Yeshiva University in New York, the flagship institution of Modern Orthodoxy.

Rabbi Blau began his association with Yeshiva University as a high school freshman. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree and was ordained at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary.

He served as the *mashgiach ruchani*—spiritual guide—at the Seminary from 1977 to 2025, appointed by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, perhaps the most important Modern Orthodox figure of the 20th century. In this role, Rabbi Blau focused on helping students with personal and spiritual issues.

In communal life, Rabbi Blau served as president of the Religious Zionists of America. He is a member of the Rabbinical Council of America and serves on the executive board of the Orthodox Caucus, a national task force addressing practical issues challenging the Jewish world.

In short, Rabbi Yosef Blau is a dyed-in-the-wool Modern Orthodox rabbi who has had a distinguished career within the halls of Orthodoxy's most important institutions.

Why am I speaking about Rabbi Blau tonight?

This past August, he penned a letter calling for “moral clarity” regarding Israel's actions in Gaza. The letter was then signed by 80 prominent Orthodox rabbis some of whom have been my teachers and mentors, including Rabbi Donniel Hartman, the director of the Hartman Institute

in Jerusalem, and Rabbis Wendy Zierler, David Jaffe, Josh Feigelson, and Hanan Shlesinger, all of whom have taught at Beth Emet.

The letter states: "We affirm that Hamas's sins and crimes do not relieve the government of Israel of its obligations to make whatever efforts are necessary to prevent mass starvation."

It goes on: "There have been months when Israel blocked humanitarian convoys on the mistaken premise that increased suffering would bring about Hamas's surrender. Instead, the result has been the deepening of despair. The justified anger toward Hamas has dangerously expanded by some extremists into blanket suspicion of the entire population of Gaza—children included—tarnished as future terrorists. Meanwhile, in Yehuda and Shomron (the West Bank), extremist settler violence has resulted in the murder of civilians and has forced Palestinian villagers from their homes, further destabilizing the region."

The letter goes on to say: "We must affirm that Judaism's vision of justice and compassion extends to all human beings. Our tradition teaches that every person is created *b'tzelem Elohim*—in the Divine image. We are the spiritual descendants of Avraham, chosen to walk in the path of Hashem, 'to do righteousness and justice' (Bereshit 18:19). Allowing an entire people to starve stands in stark contrast to this teaching."¹

Also in August, as we marked Tisha B'av, the holiday in which we mourn the loss of both Temples in Jerusalem, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the flagship Conservative Movement seminary, published an essay in which he compared the silence among rabbis concerning Israel's conduct in Gaza to the silence of Christian theologians in Europe under the Nazis. In the essay, Rabbi Schorsch warns that "the unrelenting violence against helpless Palestinians will saddle Jews with a repulsive religion riddled with hypocrisy and contradictions."

He concludes: "The messianism driving the current government of Israel is sadly out of kilter with traditional Judaism—and an utter moral abomination."²

Yossi Klein Halevi, a teacher of mine at the Hartman Institute, and perhaps Israel's most prominent public intellectual, recently wrote this:

¹ <http://www.toratchayimrabbis.org/gazahumanitariancrisis.html>)

²

<https://www.jassberlin.org/post/a-hard-tisha-b-av-rabbi-dr-ismar-schorschchancellor-emeritus-jewish-theological-seminary-7-6-2025>

“That two years of fighting the most brutal war in Israel’s history has inevitably affected the standards and behavior of parts of the IDF (though we don’t yet know to what extent). That the Netanyahu government, a coalition of the fanatical and the corrupt, is disgracing the Jewish state. That, if implemented, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich’s chilling description of the goals of this next phase of the war – total destruction and mass emigration of Palestinians – will implicate us in a war crime. That once-marginal fanatics among the settler community are protected by government patrons as they burn and injure and occasionally kill. That even as our nightmares return and Jews around the world face a familiar hatred hiding behind a new name, we are no longer innocent.”³

Such calls for moral clarity are not entirely new. Immediately after the Six Day War, Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz, predicted that if Israel did not return the territories it had captured, it would become a "secret police state" and lead to the moral and social corruption of its people. He warned that ruling over a hostile Arab population would corrupt the Israeli state and undermine the democratic foundations of the country.

Leibowitz has not been the only voice in Israel or the United States to warn of the dangers of a prolonged military occupation. In August 1967, Amos Oz, who would become one of Israel’s most celebrated novelists, wrote: “I fear for the quality of the seeds we sow in the near future in the hearts of the occupied. More than that, I fear for the seed that is being sown in the heart of the occupiers. And the first signs are already recognizable now, on the fringes of society.”

About a decade ago, journalist Tom Friedman wrote: "Friends don't let friends drive drunk." I'm afraid we've let the Israeli government get in the car, handed them the keys, and now they are careening toward a cliff.

But the growing chorus of prominent voices signals a sea change in Jewish attitudes toward the Israeli government's behavior.

This raises an obvious question: If these warnings have existed for so long, why has it taken so long to speak up loudly and clearly about the moral crisis unfolding in Gaza and the West Bank?

A few weeks ago, a young person who grew up at Beth Emet came to me with a question that cuts to the heart of our community's moral crisis: "Why is it so hard for Jews to face difficult truths about Israel's behavior?"

For years, mainstream Jewish organizations have reflexively supported Israeli government policies, viewing any criticism as dangerous to Israel's security or even as antisemitic. Today,

³ <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/our-season-of-reckoning-israels-moral-crossroads-in-gaza/>

regarding Gaza, they focus primarily on Hamas's responsibility for Palestinian suffering and for having initiated this war and believe public criticism weakens Israel in a time of vulnerability.

But the reluctance to criticize runs deeper. Many of us in the Jewish community find it difficult to see ourselves as aggressors. Most of us were raised with what historian Salo Baron called the "lachrymose conception of Jewish history" in which our collective narrative has focused on exile, persecution, pogroms, and ultimately the Holocaust. This foundational trauma shapes how we understand our place in the world and Israel's place in the world—through the lens of victimhood rather than as people who might also inflict suffering.

One seeking affirmation of this worldview through the lens of Israel's history need not look very far. Since the founding of the state, Israelis have experienced armed incursions, wars and terrorist attacks, culminating in the vicious and brutal assault of October 7. Given such conditions, it can be easy to see Israel's experience as an ongoing affirmation of Jewish victimhood and difficult to simultaneously view Israel as an aggressor causing needless harm to innocent civilians.

Moreover, since October 7, many Jews have been reluctant to engage in public criticism of Israel for fear that doing so will fuel antisemitism.

There is also the matter of how we understand Israel's formation. Certainly, those of my generation and previous generations were raised on a narrative about Israel's founding that emphasized the valor of its founders and the intransigence and even barbarism of its enemies. That narrative served as a balm for Jews after centuries experiencing vulnerability, dispossession and then genocide. But without understanding the Palestinian experience of vulnerability, dispossession, and brutality—also integral to Israel's history since 1948—it becomes nearly impossible to grapple with present moral complexities.

A failure to confront the full history—both narratives—also leaves no room for imagination, no space to contemplate alternative visions of the future, as the early Zionists themselves once dared to do.

We need to ask ourselves: has avoiding an honest confrontation with the past helped us in any way, helped us ensure Jewish safety or helped us envision a better future for Israel or ourselves? How's that working out for us?

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about Abraham as *Ivri*—Hebrew—the one who crosses over to stand up and stand out by following God's command to leave his old life behind and live a life of blessing guided by God.

This evening, Erev Yom Kippur, I want to explore yet another side to that same Hebrew root. *Ivri*, based on the root letters *ayin*, *vet*, *resh*, means not only to cross over in the positive sense I

have just described, but also to transgress—to cross the line. *Aveirah* is one of the words in Hebrew that means sin.

This is no linguistic accident. On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about Abraham's sacred crossing from Ur to Canaan to follow God's call to be a blessing and how his journey, like all of ours when we seek to do the right thing, is filled with peril. God wants us to cross over to holiness and stand with God, but as fallible human beings, we also make mistakes and cross the line into transgression. The rabbis understood this human inclination so well that they claimed the ability to make *t'shuvah*—to repent and turn back to God—was created by God even before the world was created so that we would have an opportunity to repair our mistakes, to cross back to God, before those mistakes irreparably damage our lives.

Here lies both our calling and our challenge: if we are people who cross boundaries, how do we discern which lines we are meant to cross and which we are not?

On Yom Kippur, we explore the sacred and often difficult work of crossing back—returning from places we should not have gone, reclaiming the moral ground we may have abandoned. Therefore, when the Torah establishes that we are *Ivrim* (Hebrews), I want to suggest that it is also saying we are people called to take responsibility for our transgressions so that we can make the necessary course corrections and walk the path of holiness.

To be clear, the question before us is not whether *we will* cross boundaries—that is who we are. In fact, God, in setting divine law before the Israelites, makes clear that we will transgress and that we will pay a price for doing so. Rather, the question is: toward what are we crossing, and do we have the moral courage to cross back when we have wandered into places that diminish rather than reflect the justice and holiness that God demands of us?

For the Jewish community today, perhaps nowhere is this tension over moral boundary-crossing more acute than in our relationship with Israel and how we wrestle with its conduct toward Palestinian civilians. This tension has reached unprecedented heights amid the devastation that Israel has rained down on Gaza and its two million inhabitants. Celebrated Israeli historian and philosopher Noah Yuval Harari (author of the best-selling *Sapiens* and *21 Lessons for the Twenty-First Century*) has called this moment in Jewish history the most major spiritual crisis since the fall of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. According to Harari:

"The worst-case scenario that we are facing right now – we can still prevent it, is the potential of an ethnic cleansing campaign in Gaza and the West Bank resulting in the expulsion of two million, maybe more, Palestinians. From there, the establishment of Greater Israel, the disintegration of Israeli democracy and the creation of a new Israel based on an ideology of

Jewish supremacy. The worship of what were completely anti-Jewish values for the last two millennia."⁴

It would be convenient if Israel's critics today were all anti-Zionists. But no such luck. Rabbis Blau and Schorsch and Hartman and Zierler, Yossi Klein Halevi, Noah Yuval Harari and so many other Jewish scholars who are now speaking out are nothing of the sort. They are Jews who love the Jewish people and our tradition so deeply that they cannot bear to witness our collective soul being defiled and our prospects of survival being diminished by policies and actions that contravene our most sacred values. They understand that the erosion of Israel's moral foundations jeopardizes not only the soul of the Jewish people but its physical security as well.

I have spoken to this congregation many times about Israel and Palestine, and I know that some of you will be relieved that this will be my last time to do so as your senior rabbi. But, I'm afraid, the issues I'm addressing are not going away and will still be with us after I retire.

My awareness of the Israeli-Palestinians conflict began during my first visit to Israel in 1986-1987, when I spent a year in volunteer service and fell in love with the country. It was also when I first witnessed discrimination against Palestinians.

I have shared before the story of working as a waitress at the Cinemateque in Jerusalem during my first year in Israel (1986-1987). One evening during my shift, I heard a commotion outside the restaurant and went to see what was happening. Hundreds of pita breads were strewn on the ground near an overturned bread cart, and the police were arresting the bread seller. I then witnessed the Cinemateque's Palestinian kitchen workers be arrested one after another for arguing with the police about the arrest of the bread seller. What struck me most was the response of my fellow waitresses: "You can't blame the Palestinians for their anger," they said. "They get harassed all the time." The first Intifada, the Palestinian uprising, began a month later.

This experience sparked a conviction that has shaped my thinking ever since: that justice and dignity for everyone in the land is the only path that will allow Jews to live there in safety.

When the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993, I was filled with hope that we would finally see peace for Israel and a just resolution with the Palestinians. In the 30 years since, I have been to Israel and the West Bank many times and have watched the situation deteriorate: settlements proliferated throughout the West Bank, more Palestinians were violently displaced, the Palestinian Authority (PA) was rife with corruption, yes, but also, despite its commitment to suppressing Palestinian attacks on Jews, was systematically undermined by successive Israeli governments. With the PA failing to address the needs of all but a sheltered elite, it was perhaps inevitable that Hamas's star rose.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BD7YOmQENTM>

Let me be clear: I am not naive about Palestinian violence. I have witnessed it myself. When I began rabbinic school in Jerusalem in 1990, the city was gripped by a wave of stabbing attacks. Each week, as I walked to synagogue, I passed a makeshift memorial to someone who had been stabbed to death just one block from my apartment. I still remember her name: Iris Azulai, age 18. She died 30 feet from her doorstep. A shopkeeper and a police officer were stabbed to death that day as well.

In 2002, I was in Jerusalem when a suicide bomber detonated himself at Cafe Moment, killing eleven people. I heard that deadly explosion from a short distance away. A cafe I visited one evening during that stay was attacked the following day, although the attacker was subdued before he could detonate his explosives.

I understand viscerally the fear that shapes Israeli consciousness, the trauma that drives security decisions, the legitimate concerns about safety that influence policy. This is not about diminishing Israeli suffering or ignoring the very real threats Israel faces.

But to simply blame Hamas while ignoring America's ongoing massive support for Israel's military operations and the overwhelming support those policies receive from our elected representatives and from the American Jewish establishment reflects our complicity in unending cycles of violence and desperation. All Hamas needs to do is return the hostages, some of you will respond. But our experience over the past two years demonstrates that hostages have been returned almost entirely as the result of negotiations, not aerial bombing .

It is precisely because I care deeply about the safety and security of Israel and the Jewish people that I believe there must be consequences for Israel's refusal to pursue serious ceasefire negotiations. We must ask ourselves: Does supplying Israel with offensive weaponry to sustain the bombardment of Gaza truly protect Israel, or does it simply make it easy for Israel's government to continue the war and to avoid the essential process of rebuilding Gaza, establishing civilian leadership there and, yes, working toward a just resolution with the Palestinians?

For the sake of the remaining hostages, for the long-term safety of Jews and Palestinians alike, and for everyone in the region, we must have the courage to ask whose interests the current path serves. And those who care about Israel need to let our elected officials, our self-appointed Jewish establishment leaders and our friends in Israel know that we believe this war must end and Israel must pursue a new path.

Even if the current Trump administration plan to end hostilities takes hold—and I pray that it does—the road to lasting peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians will be long. We must continue to support all efforts toward genuine reconciliation and justice and act as allies to all those here and in Israel-Palestine who are working for a better future for both peoples.

We are capable of holding multiple truths simultaneously: Israelis deserve security. Palestinians deserve security. Jewish suffering is real. Palestinian suffering is real.

Whether your primary focus is Israel's future or the fate of Palestinians, we all must acknowledge that neither one is secure without the other. Like it or not, the destinies of Jews and Palestinians are intertwined. There are 7.2 million Jews and 7.3 million Palestinians living on the land between the river and the sea, and they aren't going anywhere. The question is not whether you are pro-Israel or pro-Palestine. We must reject that binary and be pro-peace, freedom, and justice, and we must forge a way forward that recognizes this truth. Otherwise, Israelis and Palestinians will remain trapped in perpetual conflict, and many more generations will suffer devastation.

True concern and care require the courage to speak honestly, even when uncomfortable. By failing to hold Israel accountable to the highest moral standards—the same we would want applied to ourselves—we may contribute to its destruction rather than its triumph.

Even as we acknowledge the need for this moral reckoning, some may wonder: isn't criticism of Israel during wartime itself a betrayal? Yossi Klein Halevi, who I mentioned earlier, addresses this concern directly.

He writes: "We have no choice. Because preserving our moral credibility is essential for our strength. Because we cannot let the haters determine the inner life of the Jewish people... Because we owe an accounting of our actions to our friends who have stood with us.

Most of all, because Judaism demands it.

This season of self-reckoning that begins with the Hebrew month of Elul and culminates on Yom Kippur is intended not only for individual Jews but also – in fact primarily – for the Jewish collective. Undergoing this process as a people doesn't weaken us. It provides spiritual protection."⁵

Conclusion: The Path Forward

So where does this leave us on this Day of Atonement?

Abraham was willing to leave behind the safety and security of home—to break from the familiar and follow God's call—in order to bring blessing not only on himself but, as God promised, to "all the families of the earth."

Our task today is to learn the difference between crossing over to stand with God and morality and destructive transgression. It is sacred when we move from indifference to compassion, from

⁵ Op. Cit.

silence to truth-telling, from comfortable complicity to uncomfortable justice. We want to cross boundaries in order to reflect the divine image within ourselves and recognize it in others.

The work of *teshuvah*—repentance—demands the same courage Abraham showed. We must be willing to cross over from who we've been to who we're called to become. In our personal relationships, this means swallowing our pride and doing the hard work of repair. In our communal life, it means risking discomfort to stand with the vulnerable. In our relationship with Israel, it means holding it accountable to our highest Jewish values.

Today we confess: *Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu*—we have been guilty, we have betrayed, we have stolen. But confession without commitment to change is mere performance. This applies not only to our personal failings but to our collective silence about injustices committed in our name and with our support.

The question this Yom Kippur poses is both simple and profound: Which lines will you cross?

Will you cross over to have that difficult conversation you've been avoiding? Will you cross over from limiting yourself to familiar Jewish narratives about Israel to actively seeking other perspectives that will challenge and deepen your understanding? Will you cross over from a comfortable distance to engage with Palestinians, their voices and their stories? Will you stand up for what is right and just and life-giving?

I invite you to begin this crossing by seeking out thinkers who challenge conventional wisdom, by listening to Palestinian perspectives, by having honest conversations with family and friends about the complexities you've wrestled with. We will continue this conversation during the year, and tomorrow morning will be an ideal time to start. At 9:30 a.m., Hannah Graham and Danny London will lead a conversation about the concept of *t'shuvah* in the context of Israel-Palestine.

The ultimate question for us tonight is: Will we follow Abraham's example and leave behind that which keeps us from living a life of true blessing?

The choice is ours. The time is now. May we find the courage to cross over to holiness.