Kol Nidrei 5786 (2025): When Good Intentions Lead Us Astray

Would you turn your son into the police?

Just a few weeks ago, Matt Robinson was at home watching television, following the breaking news reports after the murder of Charlie Kirk. He had seen photos and video footage of the suspect, and to his shock, he recognized him to be his own son.

What would you have done?

On one hand, your civil obligation to pursue justice and uphold the law. On the other, your parental instinct and obligation to protect your own child, your only son, the one that you love.

Robinson eventually facilitated his son's surrender to authorities, knowing full well that his son might face the death penalty for his actions.

While this happened just weeks ago, this ancient dilemma echoes through our sacred texts.

What should Abraham have done when Sarah asked him to cast away Hagar and Ishmael, probably to their deaths, because she wanted to protect her own son Isaac?

What should Abraham have done when God told him, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering…"

Tonight, I want to explore this question with an ancient human dilemma that haunts every generation: "Do the ends justify the means?"

I believe we all carry in our hearts a sense of guilt for doing things we knew were immoral or wrong, damaging or hurtful, all for the sake of achieving what we believed was a noble goal.

We wanted to protect a loved one, but to do so we had to lie to them or betray their trust. We wanted to prevent hurt, but to do so we had to cause pain. We had a goal in mind, but the only way to achieve it required us to compromise our values. We tell ourselves “But it had to be done," and "there was no other way," or "the pain I caused prevented much greater pain."

I'm sure you all have personal stories. I know I do.

Toward the end of my military service, I broke a military law. The details are not as important—it's too long a story for tonight—but in essence, I tried to do something good, something that would save lives, but I did it without following military protocol. When this became known, I stood trial before a military judge. It was one of the most embarrassing and horrifying moments of my life.

The judge heard my story. He said he knew my intentions were good, but he also said that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions," before imposing a painful fine on me.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

A phrase whose origins we can detect in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

As you recall, God wants to destroy these sinful cities with their horrendous inhabitants. When Abraham hears the plan, he begins questioning whether the means to achieve this just goal—of eliminating the worst kind of evil from the world—are just.

He challenges God: What if there are 50 innocent people in the city? Is it just to kill 50 innocent people along with all the evil ones? God agrees not to destroy the city if there were 50 righteous people. Abraham continues pushing, what about 45?

40? 30? 20? And finally, God agrees that if there are 10 righteous people, God would not execute the plan.

This might be the most astonishing story in the entire Torah—Abraham stands as the moral voice insisting that means matter as much, if not more, than ends.

Tragically, when it comes to his own personal life, Abraham is so goal-oriented—first in trying to protect Sarah and Isaac that he sends away Hagar and Ishmael to their deaths, and then in his desire to show his devotion to God by sacrificing Isaac—that he fails to see how his own goals, noble as they are, demand of him the kind of means and actions that would have led him to hell, a personal hell none of us can imagine: sacrificing one's own child.

In both these stories, it is God who first saves Hagar and Ishmael, and then stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. Unlike in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, this time God shows Abraham that the means do not justify the goal.

That's it. We have our answer. The sermon could end now.

If only...

Because when we reach Passover, we realize that the goal of rescuing the Israelites—delivering them from slavery to freedom—required killing every firstborn in Egypt and drowning the entire Egyptian army in the sea. Here, horrible means were justified for the sake of the ultimate goal of liberation.

So, what do we do when we find two opposing examples, two different answers to this one question?

We keep studying.

We learn about the concept of "mitzvah haba'ah ba'aveirah"—a commandment that comes through transgression—a Jewish

teaching that suggests that good outcomes achieved through forbidden means are tainted.

We look at the commandment "Tzedek tzedek tirdof"—"Justice, justice you shall pursue." And we explain the reason why the word "justice" appears twice in the sentence, as an understanding that true justice must be achieved through justice.

Judaism also emphasizes the principle of proportionality. That minor transgressions might be permitted to prevent major harm, but serious violations require correspondingly grave circumstances to justify them. You can't commit a grave offense to achieve a good yet insignificant result.

We also learn that Jewish law sets a very high bar for accepting a transgression in order to do good. What they teach is that we are permitted to commit a transgression only if the ultimate goal is to save a life.

The concept known as "pikuach nefesh docheh Shabbat"—a permission to violate Shabbat, a grave transgression that in itself deserves the death penalty, but only if the goal is to save a life.

But even this exception becomes infinitely more complex when we move from theoretical discussions in the study hall to making decisions in the real world. What do we do when the stakes are the highest, when entire populations hang in the balance? How do we measure one life against thousands, or thousands against millions?

Consider President Truman's decision in 1945. He justified using atomic weapons against Japan because he believed they would avoid a catastrophic invasion of Japan that could cost 250,000 to one million American casualties and millions of Japanese deaths. He believed that ending the war quickly by shocking Japan into immediate surrender was preferable to prolonging a conflict that had already cost hundreds of thousands of lives.

Jewish law permits defensive action even when it means taking a life—it actually requires it—but again, at what cost?

If asked by Truman, the rabbis would likely question whether the projected casualty estimates were reliable enough to justify such extreme measures.

You see, rabbis traditionally struggled with punishing entire communities for their leaders' actions. Given the example of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Talmud asks whether a city can be held collectively responsible, generally concluding that innocent individuals shouldn't suffer for others' sins.

The rabbinic tradition of seeking multiple perspectives and exhausting all alternatives before turning to such violent action would demand proof that every other option—negotiation or any other targeted military action—was thoroughly explored.

But that was 1945.

Eighty years later, these same questions echo in our time.

Israel is fighting a war against the most vicious, cruel, inhumane enemy possible—an enemy motivated by a zealous hatred of Israel and any person who does not believe in Allah. First and foremost, Jews.

In their own words, directly from their charter, they call to "raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine" and "to establish a Muslim caliphate all around the world." It views, again in their own words, "all Western countries as Crusader enemies, with the United States at the forefront," and it states, "that the purpose of the Islamic caliphate is to fight the infidels and interlopers."

Quote again: "Say unto those who believe not, Ye shall be overcome, and thrown together into hell."

Israel is fighting a just war—and I call it just because it is not a war Israel started. It is a just war because what happened on October 7th, 2023, resurfaced for every Jew around the world traumatic memories of the most horrifying parts of our history.

Israel is fighting a just war that two years ago almost the entire world supported. But today, as we enter into its third year, when it is not clear if the goals of the war can be achieved just by military force, when there is still no detailed plan for "the day after," when our hostages are wasting away, dying in the tunnels of Gaza, when the toll on Israeli society, economy, and people is growing higher and higher, when support for Israel is deteriorating even among our best allies and more concerning, among young American Jews, among both Democrats and Republicans—and when the means to win this war include a full and total destruction of Gaza and the death of so many women and children—I can't help but wonder:

Will history judge Israel's current actions differently than it did the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

In a Gallup poll conducted in August 1945, 85% of Americans approved of the atomic bombings, with only 10% disapproving. This number dropped to around 56% in the 90s, and in the most recent poll conducted on the 80th anniversary of the bombing, in June of this year, only 35% of Americans said the bombings were justified, 31% say they were not justified, and 33% are unsure.

Only 35%. And you won't be surprised to learn that this is about the same number of Americans—across the political spectrum—who now feel Israel's means are justified.

How will history judge the way Israel is conducting this war?

Will history conclude that the only way to eliminate the threat of Hamas as a danger not just to Israel but to the entire free Western world was to engage in the massive destruction of Gaza, to create such a shock in the Muslim world that never again will a radical terrorist organization be allowed to sell its people the false narrative and dream that Israel can be destroyed through a military attack? Will history conclude that this was the only way to create such a shock that would forever change the murderous ideology of Hamas as it did with the Japanese and with Nazi Germany?

Or will history remember this war as one in which the goal was noble, right, and just—yet the means to achieve the goal, the means were justified at first until they weren't?

My friends, I couldn't give a sermon about means and goals without mentioning what is happening in Israel today.

And yes, we should all engage in very serious, deep, hard and complicated discussions about the limits of the means we use to achieve a goal when it comes to this tragic situation.

But that is not the only dilemma we have. None of us is responsible for making decisions on such a large scale. And while we can and should share our opinion with those who might be able to influence decision makers, while we must have our voice heard and our money going to support those we feel are fighting our fight, for most of us the question about justified means remains on a much more local, personal level.

I'm talking about anyone sitting here tonight who decided it was acceptable to lie to a loved one and hide the truth because they wanted to protect them or thought the truth would cause too much harm. The doctor asked to lie to her patient because their family insisted the news would devastate them. Those who broke a

promise of confidentiality for what you believed was a good reason.

I'm talking about the family who wants to end the suffering of a loved one and knows the only way to do so is to stop providing medical treatment and even food.

I'm talking about the activist who felt the only way to be heard was by breaking the law.

I'm talking about the rabbi who ignores religious rules and traditions just to appeal to more people he wants to draw into what I believe is a meaningful religious world.

I'm talking about those who voted for any candidate you believed would change one core issue you wanted changed, while knowing that some of their other policies will cause tremendous pain.

I'm talking about the journalist who struggles whether to publish crucial information obtained in illegal ways. About the CEO of the company who has to fire honest, hardworking employees to improve the bottom line for his stock owners and for the sake of his own end-of-year bonus.

I'm talking about the parents of an addict whose heart is torn because they know that the only way to help their child is to not support them until they are sober again.

This summer at the Hartman Institute, Tal Becker offered a solution that resonated deeply with me.

He reminded us that we can never truly control any outcome we plan. The only thing we can control is our decisions and behavior. Given that we will never know for certain the outcome, we must focus on our behavior—on the means.

Becker suggests we should always strive to be the best possible version of ourselves and hope that doing what is right will lead to

right results. If we succeed, we know we've done it the right way. If not, at least what we have left is our integrity—the knowledge that we did the best we could.

But he also acknowledges the times we know we can't achieve our goals through pure means.

Sometimes we must choose alliances with those whose values we reject to achieve a greater good—like Churchill joining with Stalin to fight the Nazis, or Ben-Gurion, who famously said to fight with the British against the Nazis and fight against the British as if there were no Nazis.

Sometimes we have to choose the lesser of two evils. Sometimes, we have to make a choice we know we will regret.

This brings us to tonight, to Kol Nidrei itself.

The prayer we recite three times tonight is itself an acknowledgment of this very human struggle. We ask to be released from vows we couldn't keep, promises we broke, commitments we failed to honor.

We're asking forgiveness not just for our failures, but for the impossible choices we face as human beings trying to do good in a complex world.

Tonight, as we stand before the open ark, we acknowledge that sometimes our good intentions lead us astray. Sometimes our desire to protect, to help, to make things better causes us to compromise our values. Sometimes we chose the lesser evil when no clear choice existed.

But here's what I want you to understand: The fact that you struggle with these choices, the fact that you feel guilt when you compromise your values even for good reasons—that itself is a sign of your moral integrity. It means your conscience is alive and functioning.

And this is the best wisdom I can share with you tonight. Turn inward, listen to that deep, profound sound of your conscience. Allow that inner silent voice of God within you to serve as your soul's GPS to the divine.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught that our conscience represents "the autonomous moral self," the place where we encounter God, the place where human dignity meets divine expectation.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that conscience is "God's stake in human existence"—the part of us that refuses to let us be merely human, always calling us to recognize a higher purpose.

There is no more perfect night than tonight to turn to the Hasidic teaching that "When your conscience troubles you, know that the Shechinah (Divine Presence) dwells there, making her home in your discomfort, pulling you toward teshuvah (return)."

Judaism doesn't ask us to be perfect. It asks us to be human—to wrestle, to question, to struggle with impossible choices while striving to do better.

You can approve the use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but you can also show empathy and express sorrow for the pain and hurt caused.

And yes, you can feel that Israel has no other option but to continue fighting until Hamas surrenders, lays down its weapons and releases the hostages and allows for the people of Gaza to be freed from their tyranny, but as Jews with a conscience we should not rejoice in the destruction, in the growing death toll, but rather allow ourselves to express that the means to achieving this goal are painful and are taking a huge toll from how we wish to see and understand our role in the world. We should be able to hold on to these conflicting feelings and not be called anti-Zionists or self-hating Jews.

The Hebrew word "Israel" means "one who wrestles with God." This is our inheritance—not easy answers, but the sacred struggle itself.

According to our tradition, today is the day we received the second set of the tablets after Moses broke the first set. And we are told that the Israelites carried both the broken set of tablets and the second whole set in the same ark. We have experience in being able to hold on to opposing feelings at the same time.

Just as we hold the two notes in our pocket that "the world was created for me" and "I am nothing but dust and ashes," we can hold on to the two very different commandments telling us to never forget what Amalek (hamas) has done to us and to eradicate Amalek (hamas), and to the commandment to seek and pursue not only justice, but also peace, and to save even one life, almost at any cost.

As we enter these Days of Awe, let us commit not to never making difficult choices, but to making them with greater wisdom, deeper reflection, and clearer awareness of the costs.

Let us promise to consult our values and our GPS, our conscience, before we act, to seek counsel when we're uncertain, and to own our choices fully—both their intended good and their unintended harm.

Let us strive to be people who, when faced with impossible choices, choose the path that preserves as much of our humanity as possible. And when we fall short—when our good intentions lead us down roads, we wish we hadn't traveled—let us have the courage to acknowledge our mistakes, make amends where possible, and commit to learning from our failures.

The road to hell may indeed be paved with good intentions. But the road to teshuvah—to return, to repentance, to becoming who we're meant to be—that road is paved with honest

acknowledgment of our humanity, genuine remorse for our failures, and the unshakeable commitment to keep trying to do better.

When

Tonight, we begin again. Tonight, we wrestle again with what it means to be human in God's image. Tonight, we remember that it's not our perfection that makes us holy, but our willingness to keep striving for it, even when—especially when—the choices before us offer no perfect path.

Gmar chatimah tovah—may we all be sealed for a good year, not a perfect one, but a year where our intentions align more closely with our actions, where our means honor our ends, and where our struggles make us more compassionate, not less.

Amen.