

Israel's greatest threat? Unwavering belief in its own morality

Ecclesiastes teaches that there's a time to kill and a time to heal — we must give both priorities equal weight
By [Donniel Hartman](#) February 23, 2024



An injured Palestinian is carried to Kuwait Hospital after Israeli air strikes in Gaza on February 12, 2024. Photo by Ahmad Hasaballah/Getty Images

For months now we have lived in a time of killing: The horrific barbaric killings committed by Hamas on [Oct. 7](#), followed by killing in Gaza motivated by the hope that we will never again be the victims of such evil.

According to Ecclesiastes, there is a time and season [for everything](#). A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to uproot. A time to tear, and a time to sew. A time to keep silent, and a time to speak. A time for war, and a time for peace. And yes, a time to kill. But also: a time to heal. Scholars see Ecclesiastes as representing a worldview that is morally relativistic, one devoid of the categories of good and evil, right and wrong. He sees a world where human choices are simply facts. We will be born. We will die. We will probably choose at some point in our lives to plant and procreate, moved by our predisposition to pursue our survival. And at some point, we will likely choose to kill.

As history has proven over and again, killing is not an aberration. The 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes viewed killing as core to the state of nature, as humans strive to claim our share. In this context, killing is not morally reprehensible, and there is no concept of just or unjust war. Killing and war are simply facts of life, guided by the imperative to survive and win. We who unequivocally condemn the barbarism of Hamas reject this relativistic worldview. Terrorism is an affront against humanity for those of us who see ourselves as moral beings obligated to live ethically. In Israel, there are moral relativists, especially in the ultra-nationalist camp, but they are not the norm. Most Israeli Jews take pride in having, as we like to put it, “the most moral army in the world.” But for much of the 75 years since the founding of the Jewish state, we have been forced to live in a time of killing.

This reality has given birth to the morally troubling ideology of “surviving the regional jungle,” meaning a Middle East where we are surrounded by enemies. Proponents of this worldview see our neighborhood as being inhabited by individuals, groups and nations devoid of moral principles who see killing Jews as their right and duty. Therefore, they argue, our survival requires suspending moral aspirations and doing whatever is necessary to continue to exist in a brutal neighborhood.

This approach is even more dangerous than Hobbes’ moral relativism, because its proponents can delude themselves into believing that they are maintaining their moral purity and standards, with all moral failure judged as the responsibility of the other. When the Arabs will put down their arms, they will say, Israel can return to its mission of spreading justice. Until such time when the “wolf will lie down with the lamb,” as the saying goes, we must be the wolf. This idea presents a greater danger to Israel’s survival than any Arab enemy — because it threatens our moral fiber and credibility in the international community. We Israelis also have a moral right and responsibility to self-defense against the evil that threatens us. But the idea of a just war includes the responsibility to fight that war justly. To do everything in one’s power to avoid and limit civilian casualties. To kill only to defend our nation’s security, not for vengeance. To pursue war as a last means and to bring it to a conclusion the moment one’s rights are secured — or when fighting another day will not result in furthering these rights. Or when the cost to civilians is greater than projected benefits in security.

I do not know whether the extent of death and destruction in Gaza are disproportionate to the war’s aims, and I am not arguing that it is now time for a ceasefire. I am arguing for the need to constantly question ourselves, encourage internal criticism and embrace the imperative to fight a just war justly. Doing so requires significant changes in Israel’s policies. We live in a time of killing, but it is our sacred responsibility to never succumb to morally relativism. Ecclesiastes speaks both of a time to kill and a time to heal; to succeed we must always engage in the parallel pursuit of healing even during the time of killing. That means we must build field hospitals for civilians in Gaza whose hospitals we had to destroy. It is not enough for Israel to provide humanitarian corridors for people to escape battlefields. It is on us to build tent cities where Gaza residents can live safely until they are allowed to go home. As an act of self-defense, war and the killing it invariably entails can be a manifestation of moral principles. As individuals who kill only in pursuit of defending life, there can never be a moment when our obligation to heal is suspended. One’s commitment to human life and human rights can never be exhausted by a commitment to one’s right to self-defense.

As a people committed to human rights, it is also our responsibility — not only other countries’ — to provide food, water and other essentials for the noncombatants so they can survive this time of killing, which Hamas spawned. We entered Gaza and destroyed much of it only so that we could live. It is also our responsibility to enable Palestinians in Gaza to live, and to help in their healing. The war in Gaza will come to an end. Some of its objectives will have been achieved. We now know that some will not. Tomorrow is coming — a day when it will be time to return to the task of building a society worthy of a people who have defined ourselves by the pursuit of justice and righteousness. It may be our destiny that the time to kill will never fully end. It may be our destiny to always live between the time to kill and the time to heal. If so, let us embrace the totality of its challenges and moral responsibilities.

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