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first thing that my mother asked me when she saw me after Hamas' massacre in Israel was to promise that I wouldn't write or talk about it publicly, that I wouldn't make myself a target for some violent anti-Semite. I had that conversation with her just a day or two after talking to my friends about whether or not they were going to keep their children home that week because their kids go to daycare at a synagogue and they're worried the daycare would be bombed or that an arms shooter would open fire. That should give you a sense of what it's felt like to be Jewish in recent weeks. Israel's 9-11. That's been the refrain. And I fear that analogy carries more truth than the people making it wanted to because what was 9-11? It was an attack that drowned an entire country, our country, my country, America, in terror and in rage. It drove us mad with fear. And in response, we shredded our own liberties. We invaded Afghanistan. We invaded Iraq. Our response to 9-11 led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people. It made us weaker. It made us poorer. It made us hated around the world. We didn't pull our forces out of Afghanistan until 2021, 20 years later. And when we left, we did so in humiliation and catastrophe and defeat, abandoning the country to the Taliban. Our politics still haven't recovered from the ravages of that era. It was in large part the invasion of Iraq that discredited the Republican Party's leadership class, leading directly to the rise of Donald Trump. 9-11 created a permission structure in American politics to do incredibly stupid, brutal things, and we are still paying the costs. Perhaps we always will be. In the days after Hamas' attack, I was in Tokyo of all places. As far from the people I would gather with to grieve and to process and to hurt. So I was confined to following along online, which I don't recommend. And what was so striking was to see how fast we were turning on each other, how we became obsessed not with

what should actually be done or even what was actually being done, but with what was and could be said and by whom. I read and heard more about the idiocy of student groups and random academics than about what the right response here actually was. And it's tempting to call that a distraction or a waste of time or a derangement driven by social media. But it's not. This too was an echo of what happened in America after 9-11, that era of flagpins and freedom fries. Council culture is endlessly debated today, but the boundaries of speech and the penalties for stepping over them were stronger than. And there's a purpose to that. There always is. What can and

cannot be said, shapes what can and cannot be done. So it's worth listening to what the people in power are saying right now. Y'all have gone on to Israel's defense minister said, we are fighting human animals and are acting accordingly. Israeli Major General Ghassan Alia warned, there will be no electricity and no water. There will only be destruction. You wanted hell, you will get hell. Senator Lindsey Graham said that Israel should quote, level the place. And of the civilian death toll that could bring, he said, every death going forward, I blame on Hamas, not Israel. Biden State Department released a memo to its diplomats warning them not to use phrases like an end to violence or bloodshed, not to call for a ceasefire or even for calm. And I was so struck by this exchange between a reporter from Real Clear Politics and Joe Biden's press secretary, Karin Jean-Pierre.

Well, there have been some members of Congress who have called for a ceasefire and they have not gone as far as backing the administration's call for support for Israel. So look, I've seen some of those statements this weekend. And we're going to continue to be very clear. We believe they're

wrong. We believe they're repugnant and we believe they're disgraceful. Our condemnation belongs squarely with terrorists who have brutally murdered, raped, kidnapped hundreds, hundreds of Israelis.

There can be no equivocation about that. There are not two sides here. There are not two sides. Notice the change there right at the end from where our condemnation belongs to whether there are two sides in this. I would say there are so many more than two sides. Israel is itself a fractious and divided country. They're countless Palestinians who loathe Hamas. But the point being made here is just the opposite, that there is only one side, at least right now. But hundreds of thousands of Gaza residents are being driven from their homes at pain of death in an Israeli airstrike. They know and we know they may have only rubble to return to. They know and we know that that is part of the point of this policy. When the Biden administration says there are not two sides here in that framework, which side are these people fleeing their homes on? And more to the point, who is on their side? In a way, it was almost inevitable, fitting, that George W. Bush himself would reemerge to apply the logic of 9-11 to the moment, this from a video posted by Axios. My thoughts were that we need to support Israel. No hands, ifs, or buts. This is an unprovoked attack by terrorist people willing to kill innocent people to achieve an objective. Hamas is a political organization. They do not reflect the majority of the Palestinians. And don't be surprised if Israel takes whatever action is necessary to defend herself. And it's going to be ugly for a while. If you follow Bush's reasoning closely there, it's a remarkably telling statement. Hamas does not reflect the majority of Palestinians, but Israel's reprisal needs to be supported without any ands, or ifs, or buts, ugly as it may be, implicitly whatever it may be. What was so repulsive to me, in some leftist commentary after Hamas's massacre of Israelis, was a belief in collective guilt and collective punishment. There was no debate over whether Hamas targeted and slaughtered civilians. No. The argument was that there was no such thing as an Israeli civilian. No such thing as being an innocent in Israel. It's repugnant. But does repugnance of that logic not go both ways? Is there no such thing as a civilian in Gaza? And put aside the morality of the collective punishment being needed out on Gaza, what of its wisdom? Will this reduce support for Hamas or something yet worse than Hamas? If so, then why did Hamas want to go to Israel into it, into raising and possibly reoccupying Gaza? They were not unclear that launching a massive attack capped by a pogrom they spread videos of, and then taking hostages. They were not unclear about whether or not that would elicit an overwhelming Israeli response. What is saying to Beesh wrote in the Atlantic Reads is obviously true to me, quote, Iran and Hamas are counting on Israel to attack Gaza with such ferocity. The international sympathy of the past week toward Israel, even in the Arab world, evaporates quickly and is replaced by outrage at the suffering inflicted on the two million residents of Gaza. End quote. Why might Hamas want this? Why would we not want to at least loudly ask that question? How do we make sure they do not get what they want? And what does or should Israel want beside vengeance? And I want to be clear about this. I think vengeance is a legitimate and even necessary goal here. It cannot be safe. It cannot be safe to murder Israeli civilians. But vengeance cannot be the only goal. Israelis no less than Palestinians deserve peace and security. Those need to be considerations too. And that requires considering things. I've been thinking lately about something that Spencer Ackerman, author of the book, Rain of Terror, which is I think the best book by far on how 9-11 deranged America,

something that he said, which is that the essence of the politics of 9-11 was, quote, to make scandalous the presentation of context. To make scandalous the presentation of context. There's a deep truth to that, to add context is in this kind of regime of thought, to undermine the purity of condemnation, to add sides. That's an absurd way to think. The brutal facts of the occupation, the architecture of control and humiliation and checkpoints and work permits and blockades that Palestinians live under, it does not justify Hamas's murders. But it helps explain Hamas's strength, its persistent appeal to at least some of the Palestinian people. Hamas is built on Palestinian despair. And if you radically increase Palestinian fury and despair, if you create a new wave, a new generation of fathers who lost their sons and brothers who lost their sisters and people now dedicated to revenge, have you actually made Israel safer? Or have you made Hamas or something like it stronger? Hardliners feed on each other. Hamas's political strength has been an excellent excuse for Netanyahu's government to abandon even the pretense of a real peace process. If Hamas is on the other side of the table, then there can be no peace process because there is no partner for peace. Israel is right that it cannot make peace with Hamas, that Hamas's actual aim is Israel's eradication. That helped justify the path Israel has chosen in recent years. A policy that tried to achieve safety through subjugation. This vast architecture of walls and missile defense systems and intelligence operations and checkpoints and imprisonments. The promise of all this was not justice, it was security. Itamar Ben Gavir, Israel's Minister of National Security once said, quote, my right, my wife's, my children's to roam the roads of Judea and Samaria are more important than the right of movement of the Arabs. That was the point of all this security and freedom for Israelis. And now this policy failed in the most horrible of ways. Netanyahu failed, Ben Gavir failed, there's a body count. And we're being asked to trust that a government still led by Netanyahu will respond appropriately and wisely to not under any circumstances question the decisions they make. Hamas and its backers in Iran want this war. They fear the normalization of Israel's relations with the rest of the Middle East. The misery of the Gazans is and always has been their strength. If they're the only one seen as trying to change a status quo that is unrelentingly hellish for those living inside it, then they stand alone as the champions of those who feel no hope. We've spent decades testing the proposition of whether inflicting more punishment on the Palestinians will strengthen the moderates or the extremists in their midst. The answer is known. It is folly to forget it now. There are two immovable facts here. The daily oppression the Palestinians live under and the daily threat that Israelis live amidst. And I'm not going to sit here and tell you that I know what Israel should do or how the deep structure of this conflict can be solved. I'm not among those who think there's some simple set of concessions or even at this point an imaginable deal that could or would lead to lasting peace, not now. There's an old joke though, not very funny, about a tourist who asked for directions to Dublin only to be told, well, if I were you, I wouldn't start from here. But here is where we are. And we shouldn't be fooled into believing that we cannot find ourselves somewhere much worse. If you loathe Hamas and you should loathe Hamas, you should assume that the place we're trying to lead us is not where we should be trying to go. If you don't think Netanyahu's rule has made Israel safer or more united or

closer to a resolution of the fundamental threats that face it, and it hasn't, you should not yourself be cowed into trusting his instincts in this moment. That's a lesson Americans learned or should have learned from 9-11, the one we have to pass on now. Terrorists want you to act in a haze of fury and fear. The only antidote is to open yourself to criticism and second guessing. If you don't, you find yourself doing exactly what they wanted you to do, and you can do terrible damage to yourself and terrible damage to the world, damage they could have never inflicted

on their own. I was reading an essay by Ariel Angel, the editor-in-chief of the journal Jewish Currents, and she was reflecting on the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the slaying of the first born children and adults and elderly, and she writes, quote, it seems that hiding in our liberation myth is a recognition that violence will visit the oppressed society indiscriminately. But there's something else lurking in that story too, something that has upset me since I first read it in Hebrew school as a child. After some of the early plagues, the Pharaoh agrees to let the Israelites go, but then he, quote, hardens his heart and keeps him captive. But later, later, as the plagues worsen, it is sometimes God who steps in and hardens the Pharaoh's heart after he agrees to let the Israelites go. After the plague of locusts, it reads, quote, the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not let the Israelites go. This happens repeatedly after the darkness, but the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he was not willing to let them go. I will not attempt any amateur theology here. There are many interpretations of these passages. I haven't found

one that really resolves a problem for me, but what I will say is that story is also a parable of the relentless destructive escalation that comes when our hearts harden, when fury makes it impossible for us to find a way out. What could have ended with darkness or locusts or frogs instead ends in mass death. I have for years felt nothing but despair when I stand to the abyss of this conflict. There is no country in the world that would not hunt Hamas's leaders to the ends of the earth right now if their savagery had been visited upon them, and that is to say nothing of the hostages Hamas is still holding captive. But the idea that you will destroy Hamas this way, I doubt it. Particularly if this becomes not just a generational trauma for ordinary Israelis, but also for Gazans with thousands dead and who knows how many maimed and homeless and

displaced. When I was young, the first trip I ever took anywhere without my parents was to Israel. My grandparents took me, and they were so proud. They were the Holocaust generation. It was a defining fact of their lives, and Israel's security, its existence, meant everything to them, because they felt it could one day mean everything for us. And I want for Israel what they wanted, what they saw in it, safety, a haven. And I want that for Palestinians too. And one thing I believe that there's no chance of it until power is held by different forces on both sides.

So that's one question that's going to animate the conversations I'm working on now that will really soon. How do those who want something different than this, something closer to peace, become strong enough to matter again? The hardliners make each other stronger. Is it possible for the peacemakers to do the same?

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