

We are now seven weeks away from Rosh HaShanah, a liminal time of reflection as we move toward a new year that will offer new potential as well as new challenges. How could we have imagined this time last year the tremendous upheavals that were to come at the culmination of the holiday cycle we are again approaching? It seems like yesterday, and it seems an eternity ago. New *kinot*, poems of lament that we recite on Tisha B'Av to commemorate our countless tragedies and losses, were created for the events of October 7 and their aftermath. On the afternoon of Tisha B'Av we are supposed to emerge from our sorrow and mourning with renewed hope for the future. But now, peace is ever more elusive, and sharp divisions in the world at large as well as within our own ranks make it difficult to remain positive when the future looks so uncertain. And we also struggle with feelings of ambivalence. We rejoice at every Israeli victory, but because of our own history of exile and suffering as well as our understanding of the *mitzvot*, many of us feel torn over the suffering of Palestinian civilians. Fortunately, only a very few of us wish to emulate the joyous celebrations of certain Palestinians and their supporters, but as we have recently seen after the targeted assassinations of key terrorist leaders, we are not immune to feelings of joy over the demise of our enemies. Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 39b discusses this quandary, concluding that although we may rejoice at our deliverance from the hand of the enemy, "The Holy One of Blessing is not gladdened by the downfall of the wicked." They elaborate in a midrash many of us know well in connection with the drops of wine we remove from our goblets when we recount the ten plagues during the Pesach Seder: "At that time the ministering angels desired to recite a song before the Holy One of Blessing. The Holy One of Blessing said to them: 'My handiwork are drowning in the sea, and you are reciting a song before me?' ... God does not rejoice in their downfall, but He does cause others to feel joy." Indeed, Judaism discourages *schadenfreude*, that wonderfully concise German word for gloating over the misfortune of others. Wise Berurya in Tractate Berakhot 10a shows us a better way: "There were these hooligans in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood who caused him much anguish. Rabbi Meir prayed for mercy on them, that they should all die. Rabbi Meir's wife Berurya said to him, 'What are you thinking? As it is written [Psalms 104:35]: Let sins cease from the land. Is it written, let sinners cease? Let sins cease, is written. Moreover, go to the end of the verse: And the wicked shall be no more. ... Rather pray for God to have mercy on them, that they should repent. ... Rabbi Meier saw that she was correct, and he prayed ... and they repented." This is the ideal we should emulate, but given the vastly differing values and the entrenched feelings on both sides of this dreadful conflict, it is a far-off dream, made even more elusive by countless misunderstandings that foment outrage among people not directly involved. Our parashah includes the first paragraph of the *shema Yisrael* and Moses' reiteration of the Ten Commandments. The most misunderstood of all the Commandments is the 6th: *lo tirtzach* – you shall not murder. The word *tirtzach* derives from the root רצח (*ratzach*), which means premeditated murder of a human being. For everything else the Torah uses words such as *harag*, which refers to the taking of all life for all reasons. Far too many translations read "You shall not kill," which has generated a host of inaccurate conclusions. In short, translating *tirtzach* as kill, would forbid killing in war or in self-defense, capital punishment for even the most egregious offenses, and killing animals in self-defense or for food. To take it to its logical, but ludicrous conclusion, it would be forbidden to kill a disease-carrying mosquito, an attacking animal, or a poisonous snake; we would all have to be vegetarians; and a huge array of animal byproducts, from cosmetics and biofuels to animal feed and leather products would be prohibited. Putting it in legal terms, all murder is killing, but not all killing is murder. The Torah's commandment to set up cities of refuge for those who have accidentally killed another person makes that unmistakably clear, as do the clear legal distinctions between homicide, murder, and voluntary and involuntary manslaughter in Western law. The Torah teaches that all humans are made in HaShem's image, but a would-be murderer forfeits this image. Therefore, in Parashah Mischpatim we read: "If, while breaking in, the thief is discovered, and he is struck and dies, [it is as if] he has no blood." (Exodus 22:1) According to Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 72a, the thief is risking his life [blood] in trying to acquire stolen goods: "There is a presumption that a person does not restrain himself concerning his money, and therefore the burglar must have thought, 'If I enter, and [the owner] rises against me, I will kill him.' And the Torah stated a principle: If someone comes to kill you, rise and kill him first." All of this hairsplitting makes it no easier to deal with our conflicted feelings right now. Perhaps we can derive a bit of comfort from the interpretation of the Talmudic story about the angels offered by Warsaw Ghetto Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira (1889-1943, the Piasezna Rebbe, murdered by the Nazis): "... Since the angels did not suffer at the hands of the Egyptians, they weren't permitted to rejoice. But we did suffer – we suffered greatly – and so when we were redeemed, we sang a song of rejoicing. ..." He understood all too well that we are not angels. We suffer, and we mourn the suffering of our loved ones. But as we are commanded, we rise from our mourning and *davke*, we go on living. And we continue to teach Torah to our children, and to strive for peace and justice, not only for us, but for all of HaShem's creation.

Shabbat shalom!