The Mr Kippah Incident - Moshe Lavee

(Chat GPT unsupervised translations, expect odd expressions).

She: Look, here's Mr. Kippah trying to cozy up to the Arabs. Mr. Kippah, let's go talk to him. Tell me—aren't you ashamed to wear that kippah on your head?
Me: I'm ashamed of *you*. I'm ashamed that the people of Israel have sunk so low and are doing such terrible things. I'm truly ashamed of you. It saddens me deeply. I so hope we'll be able to understand the reality of our situation and find a way...
She: Do you believe in God? Do you think God is happy you're standing there?
Me: I think that...
She: And you mourn the Nakba. They want you dead.
Me: I'm convinced, I'm absolutely convinced, that the Holy One, blessed be He, sheds a tear when He sees how far the people of Israel have fallen—
She: Fallen? Where have we fallen? Go on, tell me where we've fallen.
Me: How we reached a place where we failed the test that God gave us through Hamas. God put us to a test, and we failed it.
She: We failed?
Me: We failed. We failed by falling into a war in which we killed 15,000–18,000 children.
She: *We* did?
Me: *We* killed. We killed children.
She: Hamas killed them. Wake up. Wake up. You know the Bibas family? Who murdered them? With their own hands. Who killed them?
Me: I have family from the Gaza border region. I have friends who were killed.
She: And still you stand with the Nakba? You mourn the Nakba? They want you dead. The Nakba means no Jewish state.
Me: I mourn all suffering. I mourn all suffering.
Me: No—that's only according to your mistaken interpretation that it means no Jewish state. The Nakba...
She: What is the Nakba? Go on, tell me, enlighten me.
Me: I *will* enlighten you. The Nakba is the very sad event that happened when we achieved our independence—hundreds of thousands of Palestinians lost their homes in the land we now share...
She: Okay...
Me: It's a land for both peoples. With God's help, may we succeed in bringing back the verses that used to hang in my school when I was a child and no longer hang in yours.
She: One second—these Arabs, the ones protesting, are they suffering here? Life's hard for them? They study at university. They eat well, they sleep well.
Me: Wait—are you willing to listen to me?
She: I'm listening, but I'm asking: if they're so miserable, why are they studying here?
Me: May I quote a few verses from the Bible?
She: Go ahead.

1 mlavee@univ.haifa.ac.il

Me: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid..." "They shall beat their swords into plowshares..." "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." "Be of the disciples of Aaron—loving peace and pursuing peace, loving humanity and drawing them near to the Torah."
She: "Blot out the memory of Amalek"—do you know that one? "Blot out the memory of Amalek."
Me: Then tell me—you know so much Talmud—what did our sages say?
She: I don't know the Talmud, at all.
Me: What did our sages say about "blot out the memory of Amalek"? They said: "Sennacherib came and confused the nations."
She: Which means?
Me: Our sages understood well that God sometimes puts us to tests, and we have to know how to deal with those tests.
She: So I have a question—
Me: And that's why they said: "Sennacherib came and confused the nations." You can't know who is Amalek and who isn't. That's what it says in the Talmud. But you prefer to listen only to the voices of evil, to the *Sitra Achra* [the demonic "Other Side"], which God is using to test you—to see whether you will become like the Sitra Achra. And you don't understand that.
She: And what if I say *you're* with the Sitra Achra? That you're standing with them at the protest? *They* are the Sitra Achra.
Me: Then I say to you: whoever is protesting to stop a war that is currently doing no good—
She: They're not protesting to stop the war. They're protesting because they want you dead.
Me: *I* organized this protest, not they. This protest began with people—
She: And you're a university lecturer?
Me: Of course. Because I support ending the war. And I'm allowed to support ending the war.
She: May I ask a question?
Me: And I have a *religious obligation* to support ending the war.
She: If everything is a lesson, then what was the lesson of October 7th? What was God trying to tell us on October 7th?
Me: The lesson of October 7th was that low-intensity war is not sustainable. A low-intensity war eventually escalates and explodes into high-intensity war. And therefore, the alternative to low-intensity war is not to continue a low-intensity war. And the alternative to high-intensity war is not low-intensity war. The alternatives are—
She: You answered with nonsense. You're saying nothing.
[*Too bad I didn't get to say that the alternative is peace... she cut me off just before.*]
Me: No, you don't understand. I have a class—I have to go teach now.
She: A lecturer at the University of Haifa who organized a Nakba protest... Well, University of Haifa, this is it, huh? Jewish students at the University of Haifa—these are the lecturers you want to learn from? No. How sad. He walks around with a kippah and teaches Talmud. And stands and protests against the State of Israel.

My article in Haaretz

Thank you, Mor Sha'al, for the opportunity to share with your followers both information and sorrow regarding what is happening in Gaza.

Mor Sha'al, a social media influencer I had never heard of until last Wednesday, did me a great kindness—toward myself, my views, my beliefs, and my values—when she chased after me as I left a demonstration of the leftist forum and Arab students at the University of Haifa. While I was rushing to class, she pounced with the question: "Mr. Kippah, Mr. Kippah, how are you not ashamed? Cozying up to Arabs!" A year and a half of shock, silence, frustration, and helplessness—stemming from my inability to bring my views into the Israeli public sphere—shattered in a dialogue she uploaded online in an attempt to shame me. Yet like Balaam, who came to curse and ended up blessing, her curse turned into a blessing.

In that short, spontaneous, and unplanned conversation, I managed to share with her and her tens of thousands of followers the deep sorrow over the death of so many children in Gaza; to express the view that this tragedy results from our own failure in responding to Hamas; to articulate my experience of that failure through the lens of biblical religious thought, where this is seen as a test placed upon us by God, through Hamas, the rod of His anger. I managed to convey the simple statement that the Nakba is the tragic event in which, while we gained independence, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians lost their homes in this land—a land that could have been, and still must be, a shared home for both peoples. I recalled verses that once adorned the walls of religious-Zionist schools in the 1970s, now absent from Israeli education: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid" ; "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." I was able to say that I support ending the war—and that one may support ending the war.

The video she posted spread quickly. Many of her followers were apparently so startled that they labeled me mad, "disconnected," "not all there," "not one of us," and other such terms. Yet others, to my joy, listened. It is heartening to know that so many found encouragement in my words—that we are not alone; that more and more agree the time has come to stop the war and to recognize our mistakes. Some, though disagreeing, nonetheless appreciated the tone and responded in kind. Most heartening of all were the few who seemed genuinely stirred to reconsider their views.

These are profoundly difficult days. The coalition's tight ranks leave no room for change through conventional parliamentary channels. But another kind of tightening is also happening—among the people. So many remain unaware of the magnitude of destruction in Gaza; others deny it outright. Of those who do acknowledge reality, many insist it is a necessary war, that the destruction is calculated and legally justified under the laws of war, and that blame lies solely with Hamas. And on the margins—margins perhaps wider than we

would like—are those consumed by vengeance, hatred, and racism, who openly support what is being done, for its own sake. To these, we must also add the many who oppose government policy, yet continue to participate in its implementation—or at best, refrain from voicing protest. How do we reach their hearts?

My response in the moment to that online provocateur was unplanned. But in hindsight, perhaps the combination of religious language, patience, moral stability, and faith in the justice of our path might offer a direction. Yet we must ask: do we have time for such gentleness?

My response to the atheist critique in Haaretz (unpublished)

I was grateful to read Alon Idan's words of encouragement and blessing in his "blacklist" column last weekend. So many people in recent days have responded similarly, and I've learned that we—those calling for an end to the war, for the return of the hostages, for a political path—are not quite the persecuted minority we thought ourselves to be.

I also thank him for formulating his disagreement with me in the form of questions, thereby inviting me—much in the spirit of the Talmud—into dialogue. Idan took issue with my decision to speak in a religious register and suggested that this choice negates the possibility of a singular, unmediated view of reality. As the headline on the Haaretz website framed it: "We failed God's test? That's what troubles you most about what's happening in Gaza?" As though my religious language meant I care only about the theological dimension, not the human one. But anyone who listens carefully would know that the opposite is true: what I tried to express was precisely this—religious language can also express deep concern for human suffering.

So too, of course, can secular humanist discourse—deeply and nobly. For me, the religious-humanist path is essential, vital, present. Beneath all my uncertainties lies that one stubborn certainty, the one hidden in the sentence: "I am convinced that God sheds a tear." Some sharp-eared listeners caught me pausing when asked whether I believe in God. I didn't answer directly, but instead shifted to the figurative phrase: "I am convinced that the Holy Blessed One sheds a tear." I did so because I prefer the poetic register to the reductive language of believer/non-believer. But how can someone who recites daily that "God has no body and no corporeal form," and who has studied Maimonides, say that God sheds a tear?

In my view, Maimonides' teaching—that biblical and rabbinic phrases should be understood as pointing beyond their literal meaning—applies not only to ancient texts, but to all human speech. From this principle grows a hermeneutic grace: the continual effort to understand the words of others, to uncover the source behind them, and to assume—charitably—that they may lead to goodness or repair.

Let me, for a moment, play the secular interpreter extending hermeneutic grace to my own words in that interview: a theological claim about God is not a factual assertion about the world. It is an existential utterance describing a human stance toward the world. The

experience of moral trial exists even if not framed in religious terms. Human beings live in this world and must make moral decisions. Whether we choose good or evil is a real question, whether it grows out of reading Deuteronomy — "I have set before you life and death, good and evil; therefore choose life" —or from a secular humanist foundation.

The rationalist medieval philosophy of Maimonides and the secular humanist tradition are both formative stations in my worldview. I embrace them, I recognize their contributions to human dignity—and I nonetheless choose to speak also in the figurative religious language of scripture and image. This is not merely a rhetorical style, but the fruit of being embedded in a world of sacred texts and lived practices. I speak religiously the way the Yiddish poets I love wrote: secular to their core, yet giving new form to a religious imaginary.

That choice requires vigilance. One must examine every statement, discern the dangers it might contain, and guard against them. That is what I described in religious terms as the struggle with the Sitra Achra , the "other side." In this sense, Alon Idan's critique too deserves hermeneutic grace. I must read it as saying: Be careful. The religious language you use can also be a double-edged sword, and may lend itself to harmful or exclusionary claims. The same confidence that led me to say "God sheds a tear" is the same confidence others use to say "God is a God of vengeance." And he is right to point that out. But for me, that doesn't mean abandoning religious language. It means remaining within the contested field of interpreting scripture—and striving that this language bring forth the better angels of our tradition (or, if you prefer: of divinity).

.And beyond the theoretical debate about the legitimacy of religious language, this is a moment of emergency. Mobilizing all who share a sense of moral urgency is critical. Let me mention a concept I learned from the late Ariel Rosen-Zvi (my wife's uncle): meeting on the level of outcomes . There are moments in which religious and humanist language may diverge in style—but converge in ethical and political conclusions. When religious language, though deeply problematic from a secular-humanist standpoint, nonetheless leads to the same good outcome, then perhaps it is best to pause the philosophical debate and act together. The same holds in reverse: even when I sense danger in some secular frameworks, if secular-humanist language leads to good, we can—and must—meet on the level of outcomes.

I hope and believe that Alon Idan and I share the same convictions about what must be done in this moment. Theoretical disputes about faith and heresy matter far less than the urgent cooperation we now need. If, pragmatically, religious speech—when shared genuinely by many in Israeli society—can help open hearts to the suffering in Gaza, awaken us to the destructive convergence of trauma and manipulation, and help us break free of the captivity of our national consciousness—then may it be for good.

May it help bring about an end to the war, the return of the hostages, the healing of our wounded collective mind—and perhaps even, someday, a path to peace.