

Shabbat Va-era - November 2025

You Must Look Back!

A sermon about the moral and political power of looking, and of essential engagement with the Zionism of today

That is the message to Abraham, to Lot, and to Lot's wife, as the three of them, led away by angels; head out of the valley of S'dom and into the mountains.

What makes her turn around?

As a child, I thought it was that irresistible urge to do what you are not supposed to do. To go where you are not meant to go or touch what is not yours.

Now, at my age. I think about what it like to escape, and to know that the place you are running away from is going to be destroyed. Let alone that we know from Torah: that she is leaving behind her daughters who are married to men in the city. What mother wouldn't look behind her!

The looking back we do today is something more difficult. After two years of war in Gaza, when we have learnt to be cautious about what we look at and what can be actually seen. When looking and seeing are so carefully shaped by the world of propaganda, and where, like Abraham and his family, what we look at is about survival.

There is one woman in Israel whose story is almost the opposite of the story of Lot's wife, whom the rabbis call Lilit. This week, Major General Yifat Tomer-Yerushalmi, has been placed in detention for leaking video from the Sde Teiman prison that shows the abuse by Israeli soldiers of Palestinian prisoners. She has resigned her role as the IDF's chief military lawyer; it is an enormously important job, which is about making sure that the army follows the rule of law. Journalists are now saying that her decision to leak this information is not in fact an act of immense courage. Because Tomer Yerushalmi was involved in two years of cover-ups of very serious military abuses of the law, in Gaza. That is a shocking thing to speak of in a synagogue. It seems as though she chose not to look, or to look and to make sure that others were prevented from seeing. Her explanation is that she was looking to protect Israel and her international reputation. This now means that in Israel, the government, the people, will now have to seriously look back, and for many, to confront the truth. It also means that the people who have been trying to raise awareness of these abuses for so long have been proved as right.

Denial helps none of us.

My colleagues from the United Kingdom, active in the world Zionist congress, have just returned from its annual gathering in Jerusalem where they fought for and secured a commitment to some very serious issues of concern for Israel's security, and for the protection of all of her peoples. This includes making sure of funding and commitment to rebuild the destroyed communities, the kibbutzim in the Gaza envelop, that were destroyed on October 7. A commitment to addressing inequality in the military draft so that all are called to serve. A commitment to a national enquiry into political and military failures surrounding the events of October 7. A halt to settlement development in the E1 area and a clear prohibition on any international funds for any attempts to resettle Gaza. This is what it means when one does not look away, but chooses instead to look, with all the courage that looking takes. So many have been frightened to look, because it is difficult to describe what we see. Of using inaccurate language, language that others shape, by people who refuse to accept that Israel and Israelis are legitimate and have a right to live in peace and security like any other democratic state.

I'm also learning that it is true that in some ways Israel and our relationship with it are unique, not only morally and spiritually but also in practice. Progressive Jews worldwide are part of that continuous effort to uphold key democratic principles, as well as the correct use of our funding. to prevent the future of Israel being driven by a destructive extremism that puts its trust in the ends, in apocalyptic vision, rather than the contemporary rule of law, which must be followed every day. In my own writing, to be published next year in spring, I call this work the **Bureaucracy of Hope**. It is about the important of ordinary politics, which works itself out in real time.

We have had an incredibly difficult moral journey in the last two years. All of us, I am sure, have suffered from too much looking at desperate and terrible news, or at times not wanting to look. But we must also understand that it is difficult to do, hard to see, and that difficulty has and might continue to divide us. I believe that Lot's wife is a brilliant example of the power of looking. It wasn't her punishment, but rather her memorial. A permanent reminder for us all of the power of bravery, and a willingness to look when others would rather prevent you from seeing. A reminder that you can look, and in the political sense, describe what you see, and that this looking is moral, brave, and loyal. For our relationship with Israel, it means standing up for the highest vales. It means playing our part in Israel's ongoing story and in our own.