

Letter to Rabbis for a Cease Fire



by Phyllis Chesler

Rabbis: I reach out to you, not as your sworn enemy but as a [foremother](#). However, your recent demonstration at the UN Security Council has broken my heart. If I were blowing a shofar, something that I've never done, I would sound out a long Shevarim, which is the sound of a broken heart and also a cry for help.

I, and the [movement](#) in which I [served](#), have [pioneered](#) many of the [ideas](#) that you have continued to evolve. Like you, I recognize the wisdom of Yohanan ben Zakkai who, after the destruction of the Second Temple, taught us that we must take moral responsibility for each other, speak out against injustice, especially within our own tribe. You call this

“tikun olam,” repairing the world, although the phrase may also have very different meanings.

Above all, we are meant to be kind to each other.

Sisters! Brothers! You know far more Torah and Talmud than I do. Some of you have or have had congregations and have held Jewish communities together. Some of you have taught Talmud, officiated at B’nai Mitzva, weddings, and funerals. Others have written articles, books, and certainly leyned from the Torah.

Therefore, why did you, [Rabbis for A Cease Fire](#), so inappropriately drape yourselves in tallesim as if a prayer shawl is a fashion statement, or a tried-and-true signal of a politically correct “performance?” Why blow a shofar at the UN? Is this another political prop to bolster your rabbinical identities?

Whose attention or approval do you seek?

Why did you launch a demonstration at the UN Security Council—the very place that has so dangerously, and for so long, condemned only Israel among the nations? And another demonstration at the UN [General Assembly](#)? Why not sing the prophet Isaiah’s words to Hamas and Iran, as well as to President Biden, which you did at the Security Council?

You remained masked. I cannot tell if I know any of you personally. Thus, whoever you are, why did you protest at the UN? ? As rabbis, why focus *now* on a “cease fire” and *not* focus—really focus—on the Israeli hostages or on the atrocities that Hamas committed on 10/7? Or on the Arab world’s absolute refusal to admit any Gazan civilians at risk into their countries? Why not at least mention the permanent danger of having a jihadist community on Israel’s borders?

I sighed as I watched the video of your event. I began to look for the names of rabbis who signed your October [statement](#)? I

have read some of your work, you have honored and published mine, I have learned Torah from some of you as well.

It has [been widely reported](#) that your demonstration was supported by the [Jews for Racial and Economic Justice](#), [Rabbis for Human Rights](#), and [T'ruah](#).

You all seem to be admirable feminists, some of you are lesbian and gay feminists, a very vocal contingent are also queer and trans. Some of you have authored important feminist interpretations of Torah. Two of you once served as rabbis for a former shul of mine; one of you attended the same shul I did; another of you has included an article of mine in an anthology.

This dangerously demoralizing divide is getting too close for comfort—at least for me.

Where have I and my movement failed you? True, in less than a decade, a woman-centered and sex-based feminism was hijacked or re-defined to become more “inclusive,” “diverse,” and “equal.” Gender identity trumped sex-based identity; anti-colonialism, the abolition of an anti-black prison system, and anti-capitalism became far more important than our old-fashioned violence against women issues.

Unbelievably, all those non-rabbinical “progressives” who have opposed systemic racism in both textbooks and in curriculum, excluded Jew hatred. Your “intersectional,” anti-apartheid, and anti-capitalist allies, even role models, were also rabidly anti-Zionist.

I understand that what I once knew as feminism has changed remarkably. Rivers do not stand still. But then: How could you, as rabbis, have failed to learn the lessons of Jewish history? We are again living what Jews have experienced century after century before Israel became a sovereign nation once again. Stateless, we were vulnerable to pogroms. Now, the existence of a Jewish state is the given justification for

perpetual demonization and a pogrom.

Tell me, my people: Is your anger and *your* heartbreak really about cruel, misogynistic, and homophobic parents and rabbis? Truly, the get issue alone can fester within one's heart for a lifetime, not to mention the Orthodox overreach in Israel in matters of birth, marriage, divorce, and death. Is this the basis for your outrage and grief? Is it because the Jewish state has become too militaristic—or too religious? Or is it because Israel has increasingly been revealed as too much like other nation-states?

Is this what has psychologically compelled you to destroy the past? Have you not considered searching for a way to evolve the fabric of tradition without ripping it completely asunder?

Is it Bibi “derangement” syndrome, based on his right-wing alliances in order to maintain power, that has deepened your disgust for the Jewish state? Is it also because, incredibly, 10/7 happened on his watch?

Or, has it gotten too hot in the kitchen, given the world's anti-Zionism and anti-Judaism? Are you merely trying to survive during a tragic moment in history?

Why should you listen to me? I've been where you are.

Long ago and far away, (1948), I joined a branch of Hashomer Ha'zair in Borough Park and when my parents condemned them as a “Godless, Communist” organization, I joined Ayn Harod; in 1951, I was privileged to pack machine gun parts for Israel—also in Borough Park.

Long ago and far away, (in 1973), I chose the first woman rabbi in America, Sally Preisand, to officiate at my wedding to an Israeli. Even the night before, my poor mother kept calling to say that she “could get me a real rabbi, I only had to say the word.”

And I said: "Ma, I've been waiting thousands of years for a real rabbi and now I have one."

In 1974-75, together with E.M. Broner (z"l), I initiated the first feminist Passover seder in America in my apartment. I co-led this gathering for eighteen years.

And then, something happened.

A long time ago, (in 1988), I had the honor of opening the Torah for women to leyn from in a group for the first time at the Kotel. I also co-led a decades long grassroots struggle for the religious rights of Jewish women in Israel. I am on record as having sued the Israeli government and the Rabbanut for these rights. Despite all the support for the Israeli Supreme Court, at least in our matter, they have not yet granted us [these rights](#).

But that's not what happened. I reconnected with my long-ago yearning to study Torah and that's precisely what I did with the best chevrotah in the world: Rivka Haut (z"l), the Orthodox Jewish agunah activist and Talmud scholar whose idea it was to pray there. We did not know each other. God must have made this shidduch; She knows what a drama queen I am. Rivka and I met at that moment, in that place, and for reasons unknown to me at the time, she chose me to uncover the Torah.

For a quarter-century, from 1989 until her death in 2014, we studied together almost every single day. Eventually we began to [co-author](#) and [publish Dev'rai Torah](#). Later on, I did so on my own but always with her mentoring eyes on my work.

Something else happened. I reconnected with the Zionism of my childhood. And wrote one of the earlier books in this century (2003) about the rise of antisemitism. So many shul mates of mine quarreled with me over this. Why? Because I had not focused solely on right-wing dangers but also on left-wing and Islamic Jew hatred—and, to my horror, as I found it among the Western intelligentsia.

I was no longer comfortable, no longer able to read the parsha in a shul whose religion, (at least for so many of its' members), seemed to be criticizing Israel and closing a blind eye to global danger.

I joined an Orthodox shul where no one argued with me during prayers and where no one expected me to take a feminist leadership role.

What relief! And a shul that accepted me as I am.

And so, my dearest Rabbis:

As Reb Hillel said: If we, do not stand for ourselves, even when our people are under attack and in extreme peril—then who are we?

You have only answered Rabbi Hillel's second question, namely, if we are only for ourselves then who are we?

Do you think that caring more for the "other" than for your own people, however imperfect they may be—makes you safe, virtuous, or powerful? I fear it does not.

At least, consider modifying your thinking, moderating your actions, as our youngest Israeli soldiers, our future, are fighting and dying in Gaza.

Am I alone in fearing for our survival? Will you not stand with me?

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