Make No Mistake
By Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

Once an error enters, it stays

More than 1,700 years ago, the rabbis of the Talmud debated an educational question that now feels startlingly modern: Is it better to have a teacher who covers a great deal of material but occasionally makes mistakes, or one who moves more slowly and carefully?

The answer given by one rabbi was blunt: choose the careful teacher. Once an error enters the mind, he warned, it tends to stay there.

That insight should haunt anyone involved in modern media.

Last week, many readers encountered a New York Times opinion piece by Nicholas Kristof alleging widespread sexual violence by Israelis against Palestinians. The article relied heavily on allegations gathered through interviews facilitated by an NGO linked to Hamas governance structures in Gaza.

At almost the same moment, an independent commission in Israel released a deeply researched 300-page report documenting the sexual crimes committed by Hamas on Oct. 7 and against hostages held in Gaza.

The contrast between the two documents was difficult to ignore.

One was a journalistic opinion essay built largely around 14 interviews and inflammatory allegations that remain heavily disputed. The other was the product of a two-year investigation involving more than 430 interviews, thousands of photographs and videos, extensive cross-referencing, legal analysis and consultation with international experts in human rights and conflict-related sexual violence.

The report concluded that sexual violence by Hamas and its collaborators was “systematic, widespread, and integral” to the Oct. 7 attacks and subsequent hostage captivity. It documented recurring patterns of rape, mutilation, torture, humiliation and the deliberate filming and dissemination of abuse as a weapon of psychological terror.

Yet much of the international conversation focused instead on the far less substantiated accusations against Israel.

To be clear, allegations of abuse by Israeli soldiers or prison guards should be investigated seriously and transparently. Democracies do not prove their morality by claiming innocence. They prove it by confronting wrongdoing openly.

No country, including Israel, is immune from the corruptions of war or power.

But there is a profound moral and journalistic difference between investigating credible allegations and constructing a narrative that collapses the distinction between a democratic society wrestling with misconduct and a terrorist organization that systematically weaponized sexual violence.

That distinction matters because public perception is shaped less by careful evidence than by emotional imagery and repetition. Once an accusation enters public consciousness, corrections rarely catch up. A headline leaves a deeper imprint than a retraction. A viral allegation travels farther than nuance.

Jews know this pattern well.

For centuries, antisemitism often spread not through ordinary criticism but through grotesque accusations portraying Jews as uniquely monstrous and morally diseased. Medieval blood libels did not simply accuse Jews of crimes. They transformed Jews into symbols of evil itself, accused of violating innocence in ways so shocking that evidence almost ceased to matter.

The mechanism remains recognizable even when the language changes.

This is precisely why journalists and editors bear such extraordinary responsibility during wartime. Sexual violence allegations are among the most morally explosive claims imaginable. They demand rigorous verification, especially in conflicts saturated with propaganda, trauma and information warfare.

In the digital age, every headline becomes a teacher. Every viral image becomes part of someone's moral education.

When reporting loses precision, the consequences are not abstract. Public outrage hardens into worldview. Suspicion becomes identity. Entire peoples become flattened into caricature.

That is why moral distinctions matter so deeply.

Israel has extremists. Some Israeli officials have used rhetoric that should alarm anyone committed to democratic values and human dignity. Allegations of abuse within Israeli detention facilities must be investigated without fear or denial.

But a society that investigates its own conduct, argues publicly about its failures, empowers independent courts and exposes internal wrongdoing is not morally interchangeable with Hamas, which filmed, celebrated and promised to repeat the atrocities of Oct. 7.

This is not an argument against criticism of Israel. Democracies require criticism. It is an argument against abandoning moral seriousness in favour of sensationalism and false equivalence.

The ancient warning still applies: Once an error enters, it stays.

That is why truth demands patience. It demands evidence. And it demands the humility to recognize that in an age of outrage and instant judgment, precision is not a technicality. It is an ethical obligation.

Dan Moskovitz is the Senior Rabbi of Temple Sholom in Vancouver BC and past president of the Reform Rabbis of Canada.