**Make No Mistake - Where Error Enters it Stays**
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**Temple Sholom - Vancouver BC**
**May 15, 2026**
Video of sermon as delivered

I want to speak tonight about something painful, something indecent to discuss in a sanctuary and yet impossible to ignore.

This week, many of us read, or read about, a New York Times opinion column by Nicholas Kristof alleging widespread sexual violence by Israelis against Palestinians. The details were degrading and lurid. I am not going to repeat them all here. Part of the cruelty of a libel is that it conscripts even our mouths into spreading it.

And then, whether by coincidence or by editorial judgment, that article appeared just before the publication of a major Israeli report documenting the sexual crimes committed by Hamas on October 7 and against hostages taken into Gaza. The effect was to mute the impact of a rigorously documented 300-page report on Hamas's sexual crimes and atrocities, and to create a perverse moral equivalence between Israel and Hamas.

For many Jews, it felt like one more version of an old nightmare: the world demanding that Jews disprove the most grotesque accusations imaginable, while the crimes committed against Jews are minimized, delayed, doubted, contextualized, or converted into a political argument.

And many Jews feel caught between two moral fears at once: the fear of becoming indifferent to the suffering of others, and the fear that the oldest lies about Jews are once again being repackaged for a modern audience.

There is a teaching in the Gemara, in Bava Batra 21a, about hiring a teacher for children. The Gemara imagines two possible teachers. One covers a lot of material, but he makes mistakes. The other covers less material, more slowly, but he is careful and accurate.

Rava says: hire the faster teacher. The mistakes will eventually correct themselves.

But Rav Dimi of Nehardea says: no. Hire the careful teacher. Why? His words are unforgettable:

שבשתא על דעל כיון — shabeshata, keivan d'al, al. Once an error enters, it stays.

Once a mistaken idea enters the mind, it does not politely leave when the truth finally arrives.

The Gemara then gives a terrifying example. Yoav mislearned a verse. Instead of understanding the Torah's command to erase the memory — zecher — of Amalek, he understood it as a command to erase the males — zachar. A tiny error in pronunciation became a catastrophic error in moral judgment.

That is how seriously the rabbis take bad teaching. A mistake is not just a mistake. A mistake can become a worldview. A mistake can become policy. A mistake can become blood.

And today, the whole world is a classroom.

Every headline is a teacher. Every op-ed is an expert opinion. Every post we forward is a doctoral dissertation. Every image lodged in the imagination becomes part of someone's moral education.

And Rav Dimi is warning us: once a falsehood enters, it stays.

That is why corrections never catch up to accusations. The accusation is a headline; the correction is a footnote. The accusation is an image; the correction is an asterisk. The accusation goes around the world before truth has even put on its shoes.

Jews know this. We know it from history.

Blood libel was never merely a false accusation. It was a particular kind of accusation. It took the Jew and turned him into a monster. It took the most sacred and vulnerable things — blood, children, innocence — and claimed that Jews were secretly desecrating them. Then Jews were asked to prove the negative. Prove you did not murder the child. Prove you did not poison the well. Prove you do not use blood.

That is an impossible demand, and it is meant to be impossible.

And the next step after the libel is obvious. You make the Jew into something so heinous, vile and dangerous that they must be destroyed. It becomes a mitzvah to murder the Jew because the Jew according to the blood libel is murdering the most precious, innocent and vulnerable in society.

That's where sloppy journalism and blatant lies lead.

So let me be precise, because precision is the point of this sermon.

Criticism of Israel is not blood libel. Allegations of abuse by Israelis are not automatically blood libel. If a Palestinian detainee was sexually abused by an Israeli guard or soldier, that Palestinian is a human being created b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God, and the Torah demands investigation, prosecution, accountability and shame.

The Jewish people, of all people in history, must never become indifferent to the suffering of others. FULL STOP.

Jews know, perhaps better than most peoples, that no nation, army, movement, or ideology is immune from the corruptions of unchecked power. Loving Israel cannot mean imagining Israelis incapable of sin. It must mean demanding that even when truth is painful, we do not look away from it.

Because sexual violence is not foreign to human society. It is tragically familiar. Every society wrestles with domination, humiliation, coercion and abuse. History has already answered whether human beings are capable of evil. The question is whether societies cultivate accountability or sanctify cruelty.

But there is a difference between an allegation that must be investigated and a libelous frame that teaches the world to see the Jew and the Jewish state as uniquely depraved.

There is a difference between saying, “There are extremists and abusers in Israel, and they must be rooted out,” and saying, “Israel is morally equivalent to Hamas.”

There is a difference between a society that has criminals and a movement whose crimes are its ideology.

There is a difference between a sin a nation must confront and a strategy a terror organization celebrates.

And there is a difference between shame and pride.

Israel has extremists. Israel has people in power who use language that should make every Jew tremble. Israel has prison-abuse allegations that must not be waved away. When Jewish hands commit cruelty, it is not only a crime; it is a *chillul Hashem*, a desecration of God’s name.

We should be ashamed of that.

But shame is not weakness. Shame is moral life. Shame is the soul saying: this is not who we are supposed to be.

A society that can still feel shame still has a conscience.

And democracies do not prove their morality by claiming innocence. They prove it by their willingness to investigate wrongdoing, expose corruption, prosecute crimes and argue publicly about their failures.

A society that investigates its soldiers, argues in its courts, exposes wrongdoing in its press, empowers human-rights lawyers, and anguishes over its own extremists is a wounded society, not a demonic one.

Hamas, by contrast, did not feel shame on October 7. Hamas filmed. Hamas broadcast. Hamas celebrated. Hamas kidnapped. Hamas used Jewish bodies and Jewish families as instruments of terror. Hamas has promised to do it again.

That distinction matters.

It is not a small distinction. It is the whole moral universe.

We do not balance rape against rape. We do not say, “Your atrocity cancels my atrocity.” We do not use one victim’s agony to erase another victim’s agony. Rape is not an argument. Torture is not a debating point. A violated human being is not a piece of evidence in somebody else’s ideological war.

So our moral position must be clear:

If Israelis committed crimes, investigate them.

If Israeli officials protected abusers, expose them.

If extremists have gained power, confront them.

And if the world uses allegations — especially unverified, inflammatory, grotesque allegations — to transform the Jewish state into a mythic monster and to flatten the difference between Israel and Hamas, reject that with every ounce of moral clarity we possess.

The Torah says, תרחק שקר מדבר — midvar sheker tirchak — distance yourself from falsehood.

Not merely “do not lie.” Distance yourself from falsehood. Keep away from it. Do not flirt with it. Do not forward it. Do not beautify it. Do not let it enter the bloodstream of the world unchallenged.

And Pirkei Avot teaches: בתלמוד זהיר הוי, תלמוד ששגגת עולה זדון — be careful in teaching, because an error in learning can become deliberate sin.

That is not only advice for rabbis and schoolteachers. It is advice for journalists. It is advice for editors. It is advice for social media. It is advice for every one of us.

Be careful what you teach the world to believe.

Because once an error enters, it stays.

This is one of the most exhausting burdens of Jewish history and of being a Jew today. We are constantly asked to argue with fantasies. To disprove accusations whose power lies in

sensationalism rather than substance. And by the time we answer, the accusation has already done its work.

But exhaustion cannot be our only response. We didn't dream, and fight and die for 2,000 years to abdicate our moral perch because we got tired of standing up to haters.

The Jewish response is not despair. It is discipline.

We will be slower than the lie. But we will be truer.

We will not surrender our conscience in order to defend our people. And we will not surrender our people in order to satisfy someone else's false moral symmetry.

We will say to Israel: you are ours, and therefore we demand better of you.

We will say to the world: don't you dare turn Jewish self-criticism into ammunition for ancient hatred.

We will say to Hamas: your crimes are not resistance; they are evil.

We will say to victims, Israeli and Palestinian alike: your pain is not a prop. Your body is not a metaphor. Your suffering must not be used cynically by anyone.

And we will say to ourselves: do not become cruel. Do not become careless. Do not become so wounded by the world's lies that you lose your ability to tell the truth.

There is a verse in Psalms: אמת מארץ תצמח — truth will spring up from the earth.

Truth does not always fly. Lies fly. Rumors fly. Libels fly. Truth often grows slowly, from the ground, watered by patience, courage, evidence and moral seriousness. Like a bud in spring truth must be nurtured, guarded and bathed in sunlight.

Our task is to become gardeners of truth.

To pull out weeds. To refuse poison. To plant carefully. To teach our children carefully. To speak carefully. To be, in Rav Dimi's words, the slower teacher who makes fewer mistakes.

Because the world has too many fast teachers. What it needs, more than ever, are careful ones.

And tonight, in a world where lies travel quickly and truth arrives wounded and late, we pray:

Ribbono shel Olam, Master of the Universe, make us people of truth. Give strength to the survivors. Protect innocent life. Give Israel the courage to defeat its enemies and the conscience to confront its own sins. And give us the wisdom to know the difference between

justice and libel, between criticism and demonization, between shame that leads to teshuvah and hatred that leads to blood.

May we be worthy of the Torah's command: Tzedek, tzedek tirdof — justice, justice shall you pursue.

Not propaganda. Not vengeance. Not denial.

Justice. Twice. For them. For us. For all who still believe that truth matters.