

Given the scope and seriousness of recent happenings around the world and here at home, I hope you'll bear with me this morning as I shift from Emerson to some thoughts on those events.

It's been over a month since the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel. The sheer horror and barbarity of what was perpetrated on other human beings, particularly women and children, was sickening. This was toxic masculinity, toxic masculinity bound to toxic nationalism, glorying in the degradation of women and hideous deaths of innocent children.

These were not casualties of war. They were civilian victims of terror. Some were liberals who worked for peace and drove Gazans to hospitals in Israel. Others were just kids at a rave. Hamas fighters went door-to-door, killing and kidnaping.

And the response from many here in America and around the world - that this was justified because of past injustices was equally as sickening.

The fact that this all was followed by an outpouring of virulent antisemitism not seen in many decades has shocked us all. We had imagined that this kind of thing was behind us, here in the US anyway.

This is not to say that the Palestinian people don't have legitimate grievances against their treatment by the Israelis – and the Egyptians and some other Arab nations – as well as their own leaders. The history of the situation is one of missteps and lost chances, of greed and misused power, of willful misunderstandings on all sides. There are old injustices that need healing and resolution.

And now things have been set back by horrific violence. Violence that leads only the terrible logic of war and retribution.

I honestly don't see any way forward, and it would be presumptuous of me to even think of offering solutions. But here at home, I have skin in the game. My daughter Rachel, from my second marriage, is a Jew.

I fear for her, and her mother, and my Jewish friends.

The attack by Hamas and the Israeli invasion of Gaza that followed have been a sort of Rorschach test for us here in America, where we see different meanings in the dark fog of the unfolding events, depending on our biases or tribal allegiances or political orientation.

There's a lot of framing around good/evil binaries of one kind or another, but not much embracing of the hideous complexity of the situation. But it is tempting to uncritically take one side or another out of a sense of moral certainty.

Is it possible to achieve some clarity that can guide us? I think so. According to Susan Nieman who wrote a book titled "Moral Clarity": 'Moral clarity... is about looking at each particular case, looking at all the facts, looking at all the context, and working out your answers.'

Every situation is different. Distinctions matter.

We can start with the difference between the peoples of Gaza and Israel, and their governments. There are many Jews and Palestinians who deplore the policies and actions of those in power who say they are acting in their name.

For us as liberal religious people, there are fundamental principles at work as well, starting with our first principle - respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person - irrespective of their culture, gender, sex, religion, race, etc. As such, no person or group can be used merely as a means to some other end. Hence the prohibition against slavery or other forms of servitude.

No person or group can be deemed “less than fully human” – even those who engage in unspeakably wicked deeds. The torturer or genocidal murderer might forfeit their lives under some systems of justice – but never their human dignity.

This is a particularly hard principle to hold to – especially when the desire for vengeance and retribution runs hot.

Another critical principle is captured in an idea derived from the Canadian philosopher Michael Ignatieff, who argues that the difference between a “warrior” and a “barbarian” is “ethical restraint”. The idea is reflected in principles like those of “proportionality” (minimum force required) and “discrimination” (only legitimate targets) that are a core part of military ethics.

UU’s see the concept of ethical restraint reflected in James Luther Adams Second Smooth Stone of Liberal Religion – coercion is not acceptable, and all human relations must be freely entered into.

Ignatieff's concept of "ethical" requires that we not only consider actions but also intent. For example, to mount an attack of the kind launched by Hamas on October 7 – with the clear intention of massacring and mutilating innocent civilians – must be distinguished from military action that tries, with utmost sincerity, to limit the harm caused to non-combatants.

But how do you retain the status of a "warrior" when pitted against an opponent who is deliberate in their use of the tactics of the "barbarian" – and whose success absolutely depends on the wounding and death of the innocent? What then?

The ethicist Simon Longstaff suggests we act according to the Golden Rule – which appears in cultures around the world. Confucius said: "Do not do to others what you would not have done to yourself." It is found in the Talmud: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the entire Law, all the rest is commentary."

It is found in a number of Hadith – the sayings and deeds of the prophet Muhammad – who is recorded as having said, "Do unto all men as you would wish to have done unto you; and reject for others what you would reject for yourself."

Apply the Golden Rule, and we might imagine that not even the most savage Hamas terrorist, with an abiding hatred of the Jewish people, could countenance rape and murder. We might imagine that the most zealous defender of Israel would not bomb a hospital if a Hamas command post happened to be located beneath the structure.

Basically, the exercise of moral imagination that is required by the application of the Golden Rule would produce just the kind of ethical restraint that Ignatieff and others see as defining not only just warfare, but human relations in general. But intentions matter. Trying to exercise ethical restraint and failing is different than not having such restraints.

Sometimes there is no other way to stop those with no ethical restraints but to use force. When we do, we need to acknowledge it and grieve that necessity.

But ethical restraint only applies if you see those you are in conflict with as human beings deserving of dignity.

We all know what comes next. We otherize to dehumanize. These are not people, they are Jews. During WWII, they are the Jerrys, the Bosch, the Japs. The Nazis called the Jews vermin. Donald Trump just called his perceived enemies' vermin. Every time you hear a group reduced to a word, it dehumanizes. The lists of the names of the Other are endless and pitiless in their reductive simplicity. Libtards, wingnuts, colonizers, oppressors, and a thousand other words can all be used to dehumanize.

When we hear this kind of language, we hear the sound of ethical restraints being cast off. We reduce other human beings to abstractions – and abstractions don't have feelings, can't feel pain, don't suffer, don't deserve ethical treatment.

We all do this to some degree. It creeps in unnoticed and we have to be on guard against it all the time.

While the current conflict between Hamas and Israel is far away and beyond our control, othering is getting out of hand here in America. The radical ends of our political spectrum are particularly guilty of this.

And this IS something I believe we can do something about.

We have to be rigorous in not dehumanizing our neighbors and fellow citizens. We have to call this out when we see it and hear it. This isn't as simple as not using a particular word or name. Naming can be empowering or disempowering. We apply our First Principle – are we undermining or negating the worth and dignity of an individual or a group? Are we turning them into an abstraction and dehumanizing them?

This simple first step breaks the framing of us vs them and opens our hearts to our shared humanity. Without it there is no healthy way forward for our nation or our world.

If we have no other spiritual practice in the days to come, let it be this one.

Let us reach out across that which divides us and find our common humanity with those we disagree with. We have enjoyed a civil order that is rare and precious, and if we lose it, we may never get it back.

This Thanksgiving, let us be grateful for that blessing.

Let us work tirelessly to keep it.