

There was a photograph on the front page of The New York Times of a Palestinian child in Gaza, terribly thin, his ribs visible, his body emaciated. The image was horrible to look at. And for many of us, as Jews, as people connected to Israel, the first response was not only grief. It was shame.

What are we looking at? What is being done in our name? How could this happen? The picture seemed to demand a moral response before we had even finished looking at it.

And then the frame widened. We learned that the child had significant preexisting medical problems, problems that affected his development and his ability to eat. We saw photographs of his brother, standing beside him, looking comparatively healthy and well nourished.

Suddenly the picture became more complicated. Not false. Complicated. The child's suffering was real. His emaciation was real. But the photograph did not tell us everything we thought it told us. And perhaps that is where the moral work begins.

Because a narrow frame does not have to contain a lie in order to mislead us. It can contain something absolutely true. A suffering child. A grieving mother. A terrified hostage. A destroyed home. A bloodied soldier. Every one of those images can be completely true. And still incomplete.

So widen the frame. Look again at that Palestinian family. One child is terribly ill. His brother may not be starving, but imagine the brother's life. He has heard bombs. He has been displaced. Adults around him are terrified. Perhaps his home is gone. Perhaps there is no school, no routine, no place that feels safe. Whatever responsibility Hamas bears for this war, whatever responsibility Israel bears for particular decisions in this war, this child did not create any of it.

How can our hearts not be moved? They should be moved. If we can look at that child and feel nothing, something has gone wrong with us.

But widen the frame again. Beneath Gaza is an enormous network of tunnels. Hamas spent years building them. They have been used to move fighters, store weapons, command operations and hold Israeli hostages. They were not primarily built as bomb shelters for Palestinian civilians.

So imagine the absurd cruelty of the picture. Above ground, Palestinian families search for safety. Below ground, there is safety. Concrete. Electricity. Ventilation. Space protected from Israeli bombs. But that underground world was built for Hamas's war. Not for the families living above it.

Widen the frame again. Somewhere inside those tunnels were Israeli hostages. Men and women taken from their homes, from a music festival, from kibbutzim along the Gaza border. Hersh Goldberg-Polin, whose arm was blown off on October 7, was dragged into Gaza and held underground for months before he was murdered.

Now hold those pictures together. A Palestinian child above ground, terrified of an Israeli bomb. An Israeli hostage below ground, terrified that no one will come to rescue him. The same tunnel that could shelter one has become the prison of the other.

Widen the frame again. Children are sitting in classrooms. Then somewhere nearby, a rocket is launched toward Israel. The children know what may happen next, and they are terrified. Israel may identify the launcher and destroy it. And suddenly the schoolchildren are not merely students. They have been made into human shields in a war they did not choose.

Feel their fear. Do not explain it away. Do not say, “But Hamas.” Feel it first.

Then widen the frame again. Follow the rocket. It is flying toward Sderot, or toward one of the kibbutzim along the Gaza border. A siren sounds. A family has seconds to find shelter. Imagine a child standing with her 85-year-old grandmother. The child can run. The grandmother cannot.

Ten seconds. What do you do? Do you run? Do you stay? Do you leave your grandmother behind? Now feel that fear too.

There is no single photograph capable of capturing all of this. That is the problem. We live by frames. We see one piece of reality at a time. And our emotions rush into that frame.

The philosopher Samuel Fleischacker writes about empathy through the thought of Adam Smith. Empathy, in this deeper sense, is not merely feeling what another person feels. It is trying to imagine what the world looks like from where that person stands. Pirkei Avot teaches, ‘Do not judge another until you have reached his place. In other words, before judging someone, try to understand the world from where they stand.

Not becoming that person. Not agreeing with that person. But entering, for a moment, into that person’s field of vision. What do they see? What do they fear? What history are they carrying? What seems obvious to them that is invisible to me?

That kind of empathy is morally demanding. And it is also dangerous if we stop too soon. Because our empathy has borders. We widen the frame until we reach a picture that confirms what we already believe. And then we stop.

If I am furious at Israel, I may begin with the suffering Palestinian child. Then I widen the frame to the bombing. Then to the blockade. Then to Palestinian displacement and despair. And perhaps I stop there.

If I am fiercely protective of Israel, I may begin with that same child. Then widen the frame to Hamas. Then to the tunnels. Then to the hostages. Then to the rockets. Then to October 7. And perhaps I stop there.

We both widened the frame. Neither of us widened it enough.

That may be one of the most difficult moral challenges of our moment. Not simply: Can I care? But: Where did I stop caring? Where did I decide I had seen enough? At what point did widening the picture threaten the story I wanted to tell?

The High Holy Days ask us questions like that. Not only questions about politics. Questions about ourselves. Who do I permit into my moral imagination? Whose suffering seems immediate to me? Whose suffering requires an explanation before I am willing to feel it? Whose fear do I instinctively understand? Whose fear do I instinctively dismiss?

Empathy is not agreement. That may be one of the most important things we need to remember. I can understand why a Palestinian parent is terrified of an Israeli bomb without concluding that Israel has no right to defend itself. I can understand why an Israeli parent wants Hamas destroyed without concluding that every military action is justified. I can understand Palestinian rage without endorsing terrorism. I can understand Israeli fear without excusing cruelty.

Empathy does not abolish judgment. It makes judgment more responsible. Because empathy tells us what hurts. But empathy does not, by itself, tell us what is right.

One of the dangers is that we too easily confuse victimhood with innocence. Once we see someone suffering, we instinctively cast them as ‘the victim.’ And then, almost without realizing it, victim becomes not merely a description of what has happened to someone, but a judgment about who they are: innocent, powerless, morally pure.

But suffering does not make a person morally pure. A person can genuinely be a victim and still have the ability to make moral choices. A person can suffer terribly and still bear responsibility. A person can be victimized in one part of a story and become an aggressor in another.

Victimhood tells us that someone has suffered. It does not, by itself, tell us who is responsible.

Justice still requires us to ask: Who is responsible? What choices were available? What obligations existed? What risks were reasonable? What means were legitimate? What alternatives were possible? Who caused the danger? Who exploited it? Who tried to prevent harm? Who failed to? These are questions empathy alone can’t answer.

Jewish tradition has never confused compassion with moral blindness. There is an old rabbinic warning, often paraphrased this way: One who is merciful to a person who is cruel will eventually become cruel to person deserving mercy.

It’s a disturbing teaching. Because we want mercy to be uncomplicatedly good. But the rabbis understood something deeper. Mercy itself can become unjust if it refuses to distinguish between suffering and responsibility.

If someone attacks another person and we become so moved by the suffering of the attacker that we prevent the victim from defending himself, our compassion has not eliminated cruelty. It has redirected it.

It’s a powerful and wise teaching. But it’s also a troubling teaching because it can also be abused. We can label someone as “cruel” and then decide that their suffering no longer matters. That is not Jewish morality either.

The challenge is far harder. See the suffering. Then widen the frame. Widen it again. Keep widening when it becomes uncomfortable. And then judge. But don’t judge before you have tried to understand. Don’t imagine that understanding someone’s pain relieves us of the responsibility to judge their actions.

That is the balance I think we are losing. We are told to choose between compassion and moral discernment. I don’t believe Judaism allows us that choice.

The child in Gaza matters. The hostage underground mattered. The next Israeli grandmother who cannot reach the shelter matters. The Palestinian mother who cannot protect her children matters. The soldier deciding whether to fire matters. The schoolchild placed beside a rocket launcher matters. And their suffering does not all tell us the same thing.

There is the temptation. If everyone is suffering, perhaps everyone is equally responsible. If everyone is afraid, perhaps there are no aggressors or defenders. If everyone has a story, perhaps

there is no truth. But widening the frame does not erase moral distinctions. Quite the opposite. It gives us more information with which to make them.

We can say two things at once. This Palestinian child's suffering is real and morally urgent. And Hamas bears enormous responsibility for creating and perpetuating the conditions in which Palestinian civilians suffer.

We can say: Israel has a right and an obligation to defend its citizens. And Israel still has moral obligations in how it exercises that right.

We can say: October 7 transformed Israeli life and cannot be dismissed as merely another episode in a long conflict. And the suffering of Palestinian civilians remains suffering, even when Hamas bears responsibility for much of the danger around them.

These sentences do not cancel one another. They complete one another.

Perhaps that is what moral maturity looks like. Not certainty. Not neutrality. Not refusing to make distinctions. But the willingness to keep enlarging the field of our concern even when doing so complicates the conclusions we wanted to reach.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we ask God to see us fully. Not the photograph. Not the worst moment. Not the best moment. The whole frame.

We ask God to see our fears and our failures. Our intentions and our consequences. The harm we meant and the harm we did not mean. The circumstances that shaped us and the choices for which we remain responsible.

We ask to be seen in context. But we do not ask God to conclude that because our lives are complicated, nothing is our fault. We ask to be understood fully and fairly and still held responsible.

And perhaps one of the demands of these days is that we learn to offer one another something of the same. Not absolution. Not agreement. Not moral equivalence. A wider frame.

So before we decide that we understand what we are seeing, widen the frame. When we encounter the image that confirms everything we already believe, widen it again. When our empathy flows easily toward one person and not another, widen it again. And when the widening becomes uncomfortable, when it begins to complicate our certainty, when it threatens the story we have been telling ourselves, widen it once more.

Because perhaps the question for these High Holy Days is not simply: Did I care? Perhaps the question is: Where did I stop widening the frame?