

Opinion | Posting About Israel and Palestine Is Not a Moral Obligation – The New York Times

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GUEST ESSAY

I Don't Have to Post About My Outrage. Neither Do You.

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By Elizabeth Spiers

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I am neither Jewish nor Palestinian, and none of my six regular gigs have anything to do with foreign policy, but the other day I opened Twitter (now called X) after some time offline to find people I don't know demanding that I make a public statement about what's happening in the Middle East. It seemed that most of the people on social media had made a statement, including various corporate brands, celebrities and miscellaneous lifestyle influencers. American Eagle's chief marketing officer posted to LinkedIn that the company had changed its Times Square billboard to an image of the Israeli flag. "Praying for Israel," Justin Bieber posted on Instagram, over an image (later deleted) of what was actually Gaza.

But not everyone was taking a side. As I scrolled through my timeline, I saw lots of random citizens being told that if they didn't speak out, they, too, would have blood on their hands.

People speaking from both the right and the left seemed to attribute my silence to depraved indifference to human suffering, though they were divided on which humans were suffering. As it happens, I had been dealing with shingles (zero stars, do not recommend) and the depression I struggle with periodically. I was tired and overwhelmed, as are a great many other people. But the voices yelling at me and anyone else who failed to post seemed to believe that not making a statement was itself a statement — and an immoral one, at that.

There's a facile version of taking a stand on social media that generates righteous back patting but reduces complex issues to a simple yes or no. Taking simplistic stands can also lead to twisting words. Concern for Palestinians is portrayed as support for Hamas or hatred toward Israel or Jews in general. Anger about Hamas's deadly attacks on Israeli citizens — or any mention of antisemitism — is portrayed as denigrating the dignity of all Palestinian lives. This kind of thinking is deeply unserious and further fuels hostilities, warping nuanced positions into extremism and mistaking tweet-length expressions of outrage for brave action in the face of atrocity.

When institutions offered statements that expressed sorrow for the loss of both Israeli and Palestinian lives, some constituents and customers demanded a revision that explicitly condemned their preferred villain. If these institutional voices stayed silent, it was considered newsworthy. “Six days after Hamas’s horrific terror attacks on Israel,” a reporter at Women’s Wear Daily wrote last Thursday, “many major players in the beauty — and overall fashion — industry have remained largely silent in support of the victims on both sides of the conflict.” Did we really need or want to hear from L’Oréal or LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton?

The impulse toward loud, reductive declarations reflects genuine fear about horrors that lie beyond words. Simple binaries imply simple solutions. And it’s much more pleasant to tell yourself you stand on the side of good, against evil, than to question whether the lines of demarcation were drawn correctly.

Sitting with uncertainty is hard, especially when social media has primed us to expect perfect real-time information during traumatic events and to want instantaneous answers and resolution. Moral certainty is an anchor we cling to when factual certainty is not possible. And the faster we express it, the more certain we appear. The most righteous among us post — and do it immediately.

Knee-jerk social media posts are not what bother me most, though. Instead, it’s the idea that not posting is wrong somehow — that everyone needs to speak, all the time. It discourages shutting up and listening and letting the voices that matter the most be heard over the din. It implies it’s not OK to have any uncertainty about what’s going on or any kind of moral analysis that does not lend itself to presentation in a social media post. It does not leave time or space for people to process traumatic events in the sanctuary of their own minds or to gather more information before pronouncing a judgment. It pressures people who don’t have an opinion yet or are working out what they think to manufacture one and present it to a jury of total strangers on the internet who will render an instant verdict on its propriety.

I do have opinions, of course, but they don’t fit in a tweet (and would be extremely awkward on TikTok). I think Hamas is a terrorist group and Israel has a right to defend itself. I lived in Manhattan on Sept. 11, and even so, I can’t imagine the grief and terror Jewish people feel right now in the face of continued attacks and rising antisemitism globally. I also think that the Israeli state should not be allowed to conflate Hamas with Gaza or to cut off electricity and access to food and medical supplies to civilians who are trapped in Gaza or to justify those acts by claiming that Palestinians who live there — about half of whom are children — can just leave when they plainly can’t. If the destruction of Gaza is not the goal, it is a very real possibility, and that should be equally unacceptable.

Are these opinions helpful? Useful? Interesting? And if so, to whom?

I’m not a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, but a passage in the book “Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions” seems applicable here. “Nothing pays off like restraint of tongue and pen,” writes A.A.’s co-founder Bill Wilson. “We must avoid quick-tempered criticism and furious, power-driven arguments,” which he calls “emotional booby traps baited with pride and vengefulness.” I’ll admit I have posted on social media from a place of pride and vengeance, and as a writer, I’m perhaps less conditioned to practice restraint of pen and avoidance of arguments. But thoughtful criticism is my goal, and while I’ve regretted posting half-formed thoughts too quickly, I’ve never regretted waiting until I was less angry or not posting at all.

In an environment where people are led to believe they should post or blurt out simplistic opinions, they will, for fear that others will think they're not informed enough, they don't care enough or their moral compass has been demagnetized. But a reactionary social media post tells you nothing about what they really think or know, cheapens the discourse and impedes progress. It's sloganeering masquerading as moral clarity.

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