



Innocence Is Not Protection

Sexual Power, Prudence, and the Moral Duty to See Danger

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Uncompressed Thinking

Abstract

This essay examines the morally dangerous phrase “blaming the victim” and argues that modern culture often confuses two very different questions. The first question is moral and legal: who is guilty for the harm? The answer is clear — the perpetrator. The second question is practical and preventive: could the harm have been avoided, interrupted, or minimized before it occurred? That question is often forbidden because it sounds like cruelty toward the wounded. Yet without it, society loses the ability to protect future victims.

Sexual assault stands at the center of this essay because it exposes the painful intersection of innocence, biology, power, secrecy, ambition, status, intelligence, and choice. The Epstein case is used not as a political object, but as a structure: a morally filthy system in which male sexual

appetite, social power, access, secrecy, elite legitimacy, and weakened restraint came together. The essay explores biological asymmetry between male and female sexual danger, the paradox of high intelligence combined with low restraint, and the way powerful men can turn opportunity into predation when conscience and institutions fail.

The argument then widens beyond sexual harm. Central Park, private rooms, shipwrecks, borders, October 7, hostages, Stalin's Gulag, and family memory all appear along a "bracket of choice" — a moral spectrum that distinguishes cases where meaningful choice still exists from cases where choice disappears under force, captivity, terror, childhood vulnerability, or state power.

The purpose is not to blame victims. It is to learn how not to become one. A civilization that loves its people must do more than comfort them after harm. It must teach them how to see danger before harm comes.

I. A Word Before Entering the Argument

There are subjects one approaches almost with the feeling of stepping into a minefield. Not because one wants to be provocative, and not because one enjoys violating polite rules, but because the language around the subject has already been charged with moral explosives. One wrong word, one badly placed question, one sentence that sounds colder than intended, and the conversation is no longer about truth. It becomes about whether the person asking the question is decent.

"Blaming the victim" is such a subject.

The phrase itself now functions almost like an alarm siren. Once it is sounded, conversation usually stops. A person who asks about judgment, danger, prudence, exposure, preventability, or the chain of choices before harm is no longer treated as someone trying to understand how evil operates. He is treated as someone morally accusing the wounded. He is suspected of coldness, maybe even of secret sympathy with the perpetrator. That is not a small accusation. It is a way of removing a person from the circle of acceptable moral speech.

I understand why this happened. Victims have been blamed in ugly and dishonest ways. Women assaulted by men have been interrogated about their clothes, their tone, their drinking, their friendliness, their past relationships, their silence, their delay in reporting, or their willingness to be in a particular place. Children abused by adults have been treated as if they somehow participated in their own exploitation. Whole peoples have been told that their suffering was deserved because a political story required it. The taboo against blaming victims was born from real moral abuse.

So I do not dismiss the taboo. I respect where it came from.

But a moral rule created to protect the innocent can itself become dangerous when it prevents us from learning how innocence was exposed to danger. A taboo can begin as a shield and become a blindfold. It can protect the dignity of a wounded person while also protecting the conditions that produced the wound. It can preserve the victim's moral purity while forbidding the questions that might prevent the next victim.

This is the line I want to examine.

I am not interested in blaming victims. I am interested in preventing victimhood. I am not interested in moving guilt from the attacker to the attacked. I am interested in recovering a language of prudence, danger, self-protection, judgment, and moral formation — a language that many modern people find harsh because it does not flatter our preferred picture of human beings.

The perpetrator owns the crime. That has to be said first, not as a polite disclaimer, but as a foundation. If that sentence is weakened, everything that follows becomes morally suspect. But the fact that the perpetrator is guilty does not mean every prior decision, warning sign, environment, institution, ideology, social pressure, or failure of judgment must be declared irrelevant. Moral innocence is not the same thing as practical safety. A person may be innocent and still exposed. A person may be wronged and still have misread danger. A society may condemn the attacker completely and still ask, without cruelty, how the attack became possible.

That is the difficult space of this essay.

The purpose is not to stand over the wounded and ask, "Why did you let this happen?"

The purpose is to stand beside the living and ask, "What must we learn before it happens again?"

II. Guilt, Exposure, and Prevention

Before anything useful can be said, the words themselves must be separated. Modern argument often fuses three different ideas into one emotional knot: guilt, exposure, and prevention.

Guilt belongs to the perpetrator. That is the moral and legal center. The person who commits the assault, the abuse, the murder, the betrayal, the exploitation, or the act of terror owns that act.

Exposure is different. Exposure belongs to the structure of danger: place, isolation, intoxication, secrecy, status imbalance, physical vulnerability, political blindness, institutional failure, bad judgment, false trust, social pressure, or ideology.

Prevention is different again. Prevention belongs to everyone who had some ability to see, warn, leave, intervene, defend, restrain, protect, or design better boundaries before harm occurred.

These categories overlap in real life, but they cannot be morally confused. If a woman is assaulted, the assailant is guilty. If she was alone in a dangerous place, that fact may tell us something about exposure, but it does not transfer guilt. If a city allowed an area to become lawless, that tells us something about public failure. If friends or family failed to warn her, that belongs to the chain of preventability. If a culture taught her that caution is weakness, that belongs to education. If boys were never taught to govern sexual power and aggression, that belongs to moral formation. If institutions protected reputations instead of vulnerable people, that belongs to corruption.

But none of these layers erases the perpetrator's guilt.

This distinction may sound academic, but it is not. It is a survival distinction. A civilization that cannot distinguish guilt from preventability will become either cruel or foolish. If it assigns guilt to victims, it becomes cruel. If it refuses to study preventability, it becomes foolish. A serious society must avoid both.

The modern impulse is usually to say one sentence only: "The victim did nothing wrong." Often, morally, that is true. But if that is the only sentence allowed, we are trapped. We cannot ask whether a child was failed by adults. We cannot ask whether a young woman was taught to trust status instead of character. We cannot ask whether a city abandoned public order. We cannot ask whether an institution protected a predator. We cannot ask whether a community confused kindness with blindness. We cannot ask whether a nation slept beside an enemy whose intentions were not hidden.

The victim may have done nothing morally wrong.

That does not mean nothing went wrong.

III. The Bracket of Choice

The most important protection against cruelty in this argument is what I call the bracket of choice.

Not all victims stand in the same moral position before harm occurs. Some have meaningful freedom. Some have very little. Some have none. To discuss all victims as if they occupy the same position is dishonest, and in some cases indecent.

At one end of the bracket is the adult who still has information, time, mobility, and alternatives. This person can choose whether to go, stay, leave, drink, enter a room, trust a stranger, accept secrecy, ignore a red flag, walk alone, remain in a destructive relationship, travel with a powerful man, or silence an inner warning because he or she does not want to appear rude, judgmental, frightened, or unsophisticated.

At the other end are children, captives, hostages, victims of state terror, people ambushed by overwhelming violence, families surprised in their homes by terrorists, and people crushed by systems so large that ordinary prudence cannot explain their suffering. A child abused by an adult is not in the same bracket as an adult ignoring warning signs. A hostage is not in the same bracket as someone voluntarily entering a risky private setting. A prisoner taken by Stalin's state, or an Israeli woman dragged into captivity by terrorists, is not in the same bracket as a person walking into a dangerous room while still free to leave.

The word for that is not blame. The word is defiance. I once tried to speak about this to my oldest grandson after watching the movie *Defiance*. I wanted him to understand that whatever ideology, religion, or political philosophy shapes a human's life, defiance in the face of evil must be integrated into it. Defiance is not always cinematic. It is not always men in the forest with rifles. Sometimes it is a prisoner refusing to die spiritually in Siberia. Sometimes it is a mother working herself toward exhaustion so her children can live. Sometimes it is a seven-year-old boy becoming a man because history gave him no childhood.

So the boundary must be clear. There are victims whose suffering should not be analyzed under the category of avoidable misjudgment. There are evils so overwhelming that the only decent response is reverence for the victim and condemnation of the perpetrator.

But that truth does not erase the other side of the bracket.

Many modern harms do not begin with overwhelming force. They begin with drift. They begin with politeness, vanity, loneliness, ideology, romance, flattery, ambition, intoxication, misplaced trust, fear of seeming rude, fear of seeming prejudiced, fear of seeming old-fashioned, fear of seeming "judgmental." They begin while the future victim still has a chance to step away.

That is where prevention lives.

IV. Why Sexual Assault Must Be the Central Test

Sexual assault is the hardest area for this argument because here the emotions are strongest and the danger of being misunderstood is greatest. One speaks one sentence too bluntly, and it can sound like the old ugliness: what was she wearing, why was she there, why did she drink, why did she go, why did she not leave sooner?

So the moral fact must be held firmly from the beginning. Sexual assault is the responsibility of the person committing it. No woman, man, or child deserves sexual violation. No clothing, smile, invitation, flirtation, party, private meeting, relationship history, career ambition, friendliness, or prior mistake gives another person the right to assault. That must not be negotiated away.

But sexual danger has a structure, and refusing to examine that structure does not protect anyone.

Sexual assault often develops where asymmetry is present. Sometimes the asymmetry is physical: strength, size, age, or isolation. Sometimes it is social: money, status, fame, authority, professional power, religious authority, academic prestige, political access, or emotional dependency. Sometimes the asymmetry is chemical: alcohol, drugs, exhaustion, confusion. Sometimes it is psychological: loneliness, ambition, need for approval, desire to be chosen, desire to belong, fear of appearing provincial, fear of losing an opportunity.

The predator's advantage is not always brute force. Often it is atmosphere. A dangerous room may not look dangerous. It may look impressive. It may be a private office, a hotel suite, a donor dinner, a university circle, an elite party, a therapy relationship, a mentor relationship, a spiritual community, or an invitation that feels flattering because it comes from someone important.

This is why sexual danger cannot be reduced to the question, "Did she have a right to be there?"

Of course she had a right.

But a right is not a bodyguard.

A woman has the right to walk in a park. A student has the right to seek mentorship. A young employee has the right to meet a senior colleague. A girl has the right to believe that adults will not exploit her. A citizen has the right to trust the city. All of this is morally true. But morality does not abolish danger. The law tells us what should happen. Prudence asks what may happen when law, conscience, shame, and fear of punishment fail.

To teach prudence is not to reduce freedom. It is to make freedom survivable.

A society that tells women only “you should be free,” but refuses to say “you may still be vulnerable,” is not protecting them. It is flattering them. A society that tells young men only “follow desire,” but refuses to say “desire can become predatory if not governed,” is not liberating them. It is weakening their conscience. A society that tells everyone “trust your feelings,” but refuses to teach suspicion, boundaries, and danger, is manufacturing victims while calling itself compassionate.

The hard truth is that innocence does not protect the innocent by itself. Civilization protects them when it functions. Families protect them when they are awake. Institutions protect them when they are honest. Conscience protects them when it is formed. Prudence protects them when it is taught. And sometimes, when all those protections fail, only the individual’s uneasy instinct remains.

We should teach people not to despise that instinct.

V. Epstein as a Structure, Not Merely a Scandal

The Epstein case is almost impossible to discuss calmly because it attracts politics, disgust, conspiracy, tribal loyalty, and moral hysteria. People want to know which party is damaged, which famous name appears, which side is embarrassed, which enemy can be exposed. Some political questions may be legitimate. But if politics becomes the center, the deeper human lesson disappears.

The deeper lesson is structure.

Epstein’s world was not merely a collection of private sins. It was an environment built from appetite, opportunity, wealth, secrecy, youth, status, access, intelligence, and weakened restraint. He did not need to invent male weakness. He needed to arrange it. He needed to create settings where powerful men could act with reduced fear of consequence. He needed access to vulnerable girls and young women. He needed legitimacy from elite circles. He needed an atmosphere in which people would not ask too many questions, or would ask them too late, or would decide that asking was socially inconvenient.

That is what makes the case so morally filthy. It was not only lust. It was organization. It was not only appetite. It was access. It was not only individual failure. It was social permission.

Predatory systems do not survive on one predator alone. They need openings. They need silence. They need social lubrication. They need people who prefer not to know. They need institutions that care more about reputation than clarity. They need bystanders who sense something wrong but do not want to become inconvenient. They need young people who

mistake proximity to power for safety. They need powerful people who confuse intelligence, wealth, fame, or influence with moral exemption.

The structure is older than Epstein: appetite, opportunity, power, secrecy, and weak restraint.

Once that formula is seen, the case becomes less mysterious, though not less disgusting. Evil often does not arrive dressed as evil. It arrives as access. It arrives as sophistication. It arrives as opportunity. It arrives with beautiful rooms, important names, private introductions, and language that makes exploitation feel like privilege.

The question is not only how Epstein existed. The question is what his world revealed about the conditions under which abuse becomes organized, normalized, protected, and repeated.

VI. Biological Asymmetry: Not Excuse, But Reality

The Epstein case also forces a second forbidden issue: biology.

One does not have to hate men to acknowledge that male and female sexual danger are not symmetrical. Men, as a class, possess greater physical strength, stronger patterns of sexual pursuit, and a more aggressive edge when restraint collapses. This is not an accusation against every man. It is not a claim that all men are predators. It is not a claim that women cannot abuse, exploit, manipulate, or destroy. They can.

But the recurring pattern of older powerful men seeking access to younger vulnerable women is not random. It rests on something stubborn in the human animal.

Biology is not destiny. But biology is risk.

That distinction is crucial. If biology were destiny, no man could be morally responsible. That is false and obscene. Men are responsible precisely because civilization expects them to govern appetite. A man is not guilty for possessing sexual drive. He becomes guilty when he allows appetite to overrule conscience, consent, law, dignity, and the humanity of another person.

A civilized man is not a man without dangerous drives. He is a man whose conscience, religion, family formation, shame, honor, discipline, and fear of law stand between drive and action. Civilization is not built on the fantasy that human beings are angels. It is built on the knowledge that they are not.

This is why the collapse of restraint matters. When religious norms are mocked only as repression, when family is weakened, when shame is treated only as psychological damage, when sexual liberation is celebrated without moral formation, when elite status protects private vice, and when vulnerable people are taught to trust glamour instead of character, the

old animal does not disappear. It gets better rooms. It gets better lawyers. It gets better airplanes. It gets better language. It gets access.

That, to me, is one of the disturbing lessons of Epstein.

The predator does not always appear as a monster. Sometimes he appears as a donor, intellectual, financier, artist, scientist, professor, philanthropist, or friend of famous people. Sometimes he can speak the language of sophistication. Sometimes he knows exactly how to make exploitation look like opportunity. Sometimes he knows that the young, ambitious, lonely, wounded, or flattered person will silence a doubt because the room seems too important to question.

In that sense, the first defense against sexual predation is not politeness. It is moral imagination — the ability to imagine that evil can wear good clothes.

VII. The Paradox of Intelligence and Low Restraint

The Epstein material raises another uncomfortable question. Why do intelligent, high-achieving, high-status men so often appear in sexual scandals?

This must be handled carefully. Intelligence does not make a man immoral. Genius does not cause predation. Many brilliant men live disciplined and honorable lives. But there is a recognizable human pattern in which unusual mental energy, ambition, creativity, sexual intensity, appetite, and risk-taking may coexist in the same person. Some men run hotter than average — mentally, socially, creatively, sexually, politically, financially. When that energy is governed, it may build, create, lead, discover, serve, and inspire. When it is not governed, it may consume.

The danger is not intelligence itself. The danger is intelligence without moral formation.

Intelligence can deepen morality. But it can also sharpen appetite. It can rationalize. It can compartmentalize. It can manipulate. It can create exceptions. It can describe ugly desire in elegant language. It can say, “This is complicated,” when the moral truth is simple. It can persuade a man that ordinary rules were written for ordinary people.

This is one of the darker paradoxes of human life: intelligence does not necessarily restrain the animal. Sometimes it arms the animal.

The Epstein world attracted not only crude men but accomplished men. That is part of what makes it so disturbing. One wants to believe that education protects morality. It does not. A university degree does not restrain lust. A brilliant mind does not guarantee conscience. A man

may understand physics, finance, politics, art, law, or literature and still fail to understand the soul of another human being standing before him.

That is why moral formation must not be replaced by intellectual admiration. A clever predator is more dangerous than a stupid one. A powerful clever predator is more dangerous still. And a powerful clever predator surrounded by institutions that admire him may be nearly impossible for the vulnerable to recognize in time.

This is the problem of high-status danger. The potential victim is not drawn only by desire or carelessness. She may be drawn by legitimacy. The room tells her, "This must be safe; important people are here." The name tells her, "This must be honorable; respected people know him." The invitation tells her, "This is an opportunity; do not be provincial." The atmosphere tells her, "If you are uncomfortable, perhaps you are not sophisticated enough."

That is often where the gate begins.

VIII. The Gate Before the Trap

Many abuse cases contain a moment before the trap closes.

Not all. This must be repeated because it is morally important. Some victims are children. Some are coerced before they understand the situation. Some are drugged, overpowered, trafficked, deceived, psychologically captured, or trapped inside families and institutions where escape is not simple. Those cases belong elsewhere on the bracket.

But many cases do have an earlier gate.

The gate may be a first invitation, a private meeting, a ride, a drink, a hotel room, a flattering older man, a mentor who wants secrecy, a boss who begins with compliments and tests boundaries slowly, a therapist who creates emotional dependency, a teacher who communicates privately, a spiritual leader who confuses intimacy with guidance, a donor who offers access, a famous person who makes a young person feel chosen, or a relationship in which the first lie, first insult, first pressure, or first act of control is explained away.

The gate is often small because evil rarely begins by announcing itself. It begins by asking for one exception.

This is why the phrase "right choices" must be located at the correct moment. It is not a phrase for the emergency room, the police interview, the broken survivor, the funeral, or the hostage tunnel. At that point the victim needs protection, tenderness, justice, and time.

"Right choices" belongs to the day before.

It belongs to education, parenting, religious formation, dating, friendship, travel, institutional design, professional boundaries, and the quiet inner voice that says: something here is wrong.

Modern culture often teaches people to silence that voice. It says suspicion is prejudice. Boundaries are unkind. Fear is weakness. Traditional caution is outdated. Saying no is rude. Avoiding certain places is surrender. Avoiding certain men is stereotyping. Asking hard questions is judgmental. Trusting instinct is irrational.

But often instinct is the body's first contact with reality.

Not every fear is wise. Fear can be distorted by trauma, prejudice, or imagination. But fear should not automatically be dismissed because it is uncomfortable. Sometimes discomfort is the soul recognizing danger before the intellect has written its excuse.

Practical intelligence is not merely IQ. It is contact with reality. It is the ability to read the room beneath the room. It is knowing that access is not honor, charm is not character, privacy is not intimacy, attention is not love, and status is not trustworthiness.

IX. What Women Must Be Told Without Cruelty

Women must be told the truth, but in a way that strengthens rather than humiliates.

A woman is not responsible for a man's crime. But before harm occurs, where real choice exists, she is responsible for taking danger seriously. I know this sentence sounds emotionally dangerous. It stands too close to older forms of blame. But there is a profound difference between saying after an assault, "You caused this," and saying before danger, "You must be careful because evil exists."

The first is cruelty.

The second is love.

A young woman should not be taught that every warning is oppression. She should not be taught that every boundary is patriarchal control. She should not be taught that fear is automatically weakness or that modern freedom requires indifference to ancient dangers. She should be taught to read asymmetry: age, status, money, power, isolation, secrecy, alcohol, dependency, flattery, pressure, and the subtle demand to override discomfort in order to appear mature.

She should be taught that a man who insists on secrecy may not be offering intimacy; he may be removing witnesses. A man who moves too quickly may not be passionate; he may be testing compliance. A man who offers access may be buying trust. A man who makes her feel

rude for hesitating is already crossing a boundary. A man who surrounds himself with glamour but no moral accountability is dangerous even if admired by important people.

This is not fearmongering. It is literacy.

A free person must be literate in danger.

This does not mean women should live in terror. It means they should not be lied to. Their freedom is real. Their dignity is real. Their right to move, work, study, travel, dress, speak, and choose is real. But vulnerability is also real. Physical asymmetry is real. Predatory male sexuality is real. Intoxication changes risk. Isolation changes risk. Power changes risk. Secrecy changes risk.

A culture that hides these facts in the name of empowerment does not empower women. It sends them unarmed into rooms where danger knows exactly what it is doing.

X. What Men Must Be Told Without Evasion

A serious essay on sexual victimization must speak not only to potential victims but to men.

It is not enough to tell women to be careful. Men must be taught to be civilized.

Boys must be taught that sexual energy is powerful and morally dangerous if ungoverned. They must be taught that masculinity is not appetite but discipline. They must be taught that desire does not create entitlement, that consent is not a technical loophole, that intoxication is not opportunity, that weakness in another person is not permission, and that private power over someone vulnerable is a moral test.

A culture that refuses to teach male self-command will eventually try to solve male predation by teaching women endless defensive strategies. That is unfair and insufficient. The first wall against abuse should be the conscience of the potential abuser.

But conscience does not form itself automatically. It is formed by fathers, mothers, religion, teachers, law, shame, admiration, punishment, example, and the stories a culture tells about honor. When a society mocks restraint but still expects self-control, it is living on inherited moral capital while refusing to replenish it.

Men must be told the truth: biology explains the presence of dangerous drives; it does not excuse surrender to them. Power increases obligation. Intelligence increases guilt when used to rationalize harm. Status does not place a man above ordinary morality. If anything, it places him under greater judgment.

The intelligent man who exploits the vulnerable is not less guilty because he is intelligent. He is more guilty because he had more tools with which to recognize the truth.

XI. Central Park and the Ethics of Prudence

The Central Park jogger case remains painful because it begins as something ordinary. A woman goes jogging. That should not be dangerous. A park in a civilized city should belong to peaceful citizens. A runner should not have to calculate predatory violence before exercising.

But the world does not become safe because we say it should be safe.

I am not using that case to retry the criminal investigation or assign legal guilt. My interest is the moral and practical question surrounding the event: can an adult decision be innocent and still unwise?

I think the answer is yes.

A person may have every right to do something and still be imprudent in doing it under certain conditions. If I say a man should not flash cash in a dangerous neighborhood, I am not excusing robbery. If I say a driver should not leave valuables visible in an unlocked car, I am not excusing theft. If I say a teenager should not become intoxicated among strangers, I am not excusing assault. If I say a woman should be cautious about isolated places where male violence can operate without witnesses, I am not excusing male violence.

I am describing the world in which bodies live.

Rights describe what others are obligated not to do to you. Prudence describes what you must consider because some people will violate those obligations anyway.

This distinction is hard for modern people because they often experience prudence as defeat. They hear caution as surrender. They say: "So women should not be free?" Of course women should be free. Men should be free. Children should be free to grow in safety. Citizens should be free to walk through parks. But freedom does not remove the need for judgment.

In a healthy society, freedom and prudence are allies. In a decaying society, freedom is proclaimed while prudence is mocked as fear.

A society that cannot teach prudence because it fears sounding judgmental will produce more victims and then congratulate itself for its compassion toward them.

XII. Private Rooms, Voluntary Entry, and the Question We Avoid

Some cases are especially difficult because they involve adults, disputed facts, public figures, private encounters, and the uneasy question of voluntary entry. A person goes to a private place, enters a room, accepts a meeting, follows an invitation, trusts a tone, or assumes that a respected person will behave within moral limits. Then something happens, or is alleged to have happened, and the public argument begins.

This is where language must be handled carefully.

Voluntary entry does not equal consent to harm. A woman who enters a room, accepts a meeting, joins a party, goes to an apartment, or speaks privately with a man has not consented to assault. That must remain absolute.

But voluntary entry may still matter to prevention. It may reveal the power of status, the weakness of boundaries, the danger of secrecy, the pressure of politeness, the intoxication of opportunity, or the false belief that public respectability equals private safety.

The correct question is not, “Did she deserve what happened because she went?”

The correct question is, “What warning signs should a prudent person learn to recognize before entering similar circumstances?”

That difference matters.

A culture that cannot ask the second question because it fears sounding like the first becomes unable to teach prudence. It leaves future victims with a shallow moral slogan: “You had the right.” Yes, you had the right. But rights do not illuminate the hallway, check the exit, measure the man’s character, or protect you when witnesses disappear.

The task is not to reduce women’s freedom.

The task is to teach that freedom must travel with discernment.

XIII. Beyond Sexual Harm: Shipwrecks, Borders, and October 7

Sexual assault is the central test of this essay because it forces us to speak about innocence, biology, trust, and danger. But the same moral structure extends beyond sex.

The shipwreck image clarifies the broader principle. A boat is sinking. People are in the water. A safety boat has limited capacity. Everyone wants to live. No one climbing toward rescue is evil for wanting survival. But if too many climb in, the safety boat sinks and everyone may drown.

This is not cruelty. It is physics.

The lesson is that compassion does not suspend limits. A lifeboat has a capacity. A border has a capacity. A family has a capacity. A school has a capacity. A neighborhood has a capacity. A civilization has a capacity. A human nervous system has a capacity. When people refuse to discuss limits because limits sound unkind, they do not become more compassionate. They become less useful.

Borders work the same way. A nation may feel compassion for outsiders who suffer. It may recognize poverty, violence, desperation, and injustice. But if compassion destroys the border, the result may be trafficking, crime, social fragmentation, exploitation, resentment, and eventually political cruelty. Compassion without structure may produce the very suffering it hoped to relieve.

This is not hatred. It is arithmetic.

October 7 belongs much farther along the bracket of innocence. A family in its home is not morally responsible for terrorists entering. A child in a safe room is not responsible for the ideology of murder. A hostage dragged into Gaza is not responsible for captivity. In such cases, guilt belongs completely to the perpetrators.

But even there, after honoring the victims and condemning the murderers, the living must ask about preventability at other levels: intelligence, border defense, military readiness, political assumptions, technological overconfidence, ideological blindness, and the dangerous belief that normal life beside declared evil can remain normal indefinitely.

This is not blaming the murdered. It is protecting the living.

In Israel there is, or must be, a powerful ancient blend: relying on G-d and carrying the sword. Either one without the other can become dangerous. Faith without the sword can become passivity. The sword without moral restraint can become brutality. A people surrounded by enemies must carry both moral seriousness and physical readiness. Prayer is not a security system. Compassion is not intelligence. A fence is not a strategy unless backed by men prepared to defend it.

The same principle applies from the private room to the national border: goodness is not protection unless joined to vigilance.

XIV. Hostages and the Moment Choice Disappears

A hostage is the clearest example of what happens when the bracket shifts.

Before captivity, there may be many layers of choice and preventability — personal, communal, military, national. Once captivity begins, the victim's freedom collapses. The moral universe narrows to survival. The questions change. What can be said? What must be hidden? When should one comply? When should one resist? How does one preserve sanity? How does one remain human under the control of people who have already declared your humanity irrelevant?

At that point, the phrase “right choices” must be used humbly. A hostage's choices are not the choices of a free person. They are choices under coercion. We should be very careful judging them from the comfort of safety.

But precisely because captivity is so morally clear, it helps us understand the earlier stages. The purpose of examining preventability is not to judge the person in the tunnel. It is to keep people from reaching the tunnel, the locked room, the isolated park, the predator's island, the sinking boat, the undefended border — the point where choice becomes almost meaningless.

The best time to defend freedom is before it disappears.

That is why defiance must begin early. Not only with weapons, though sometimes weapons are necessary. It begins with language. With warning. With suspicion. With the courage to be considered rude. With the willingness to disappoint an ideology. With the refusal to translate danger into emotional safety.

XV. Families, Schools, Religion, and the Formation of Prudence

An intelligent individual does not appear from nowhere. Prudence is taught.

A child must be taught that evil exists, not in a way that destroys innocence, but in a way that protects it. A teenager must be taught that charm is not character, privacy is not intimacy, attention is not love, and status is not trustworthiness. A daughter must be taught that her freedom is real, but so is her vulnerability. A son must be taught that desire is not

commandment, strength is not permission, and sexual drive must be governed by conscience. Both must be taught that saying no is not rudeness. It is self-possession.

Parents must be willing to be unpopular before danger arrives. Schools must teach boundaries, not merely slogans. Religious communities must speak honestly about temptation, lust, shame, honor, discipline, and self-command. Civil institutions must understand that procedures after abuse are not enough if they never teach danger before abuse.

Religion, at its best, has always understood that human beings contain darkness. It does not imagine that education abolishes appetite. It does not imagine that kindness dissolves envy, lust, cruelty, ambition, resentment, or hatred. It builds prohibitions, rituals, restraints, repentance, modesty, shame, awe, and duty around the dangerous human animal.

Modern culture often congratulates itself for escaping those restraints. Sometimes the old restraints were excessive or unfair; that should be admitted. But when restraints are removed, something must replace them. Too often nothing does, except self-expression, consent language, institutional paperwork, and therapy after damage has been done.

That is not enough.

The Epstein world was not created because powerful men had too many restraints. It was created because they had too few. And vulnerable people had too little protection from the meaning of that fact.

XVI. Institutions and the Shared Burden of Prevention

The individual matters, but the individual is not everything. One danger in talking about victim choices is that society may use the language of prudence to excuse institutional failure. That must not happen.

A city must maintain public safety. A school must protect students. A family must protect children. A government must protect borders. An army must protect civilians. A court must punish perpetrators. A workplace must enforce boundaries. A university must not protect donors, professors, athletes, or administrators at the expense of the vulnerable. A religious community must not hide abuse to preserve reputation. A culture must tell the truth about danger.

Preventability has layers.

The victim may or may not have misread danger. The family may or may not have failed to warn. The institution may or may not have ignored signals. The state may or may not have

abandoned order. The culture may or may not have trained people to look away. The perpetrator remains guilty, but the chain of failure may extend far beyond him.

This layered view is morally demanding because it refuses easy slogans. It does not allow perpetrators to hide behind victim error. It does not allow victims, families, institutions, or governments to hide behind innocence when there are lessons to learn. It does not allow society to comfort itself with sympathy after harm while refusing discipline before harm.

The question is not, “Who else can we blame besides the perpetrator?”

The question is, “Where could the harm have been stopped?”

That question may be uncomfortable. But prevention usually lives inside uncomfortable questions.

XVII. Against Hysteria, Against Excuse

In thinking about Epstein, I found myself wanting to avoid hysteria. Hysteria can feel morally satisfying because it gives the impression of intensity. It raises the voice, sharpens the accusation, names enemies, and creates the feeling that one has taken a strong stand.

But hysteria often prevents thought.

It turns every case into a stage for existing loyalties. Who can I blame that I already hate? Which side benefits? Which enemy is exposed? Which tribe is vindicated? That kind of thinking may produce political pleasure, but it does not produce protection.

Abuse is not first a partisan phenomenon. It is a human phenomenon.

The same is true of victimhood. To treat every victim as pure helplessness and every question about judgment as cruelty is not morality. It is sentimentalism. To treat every victim as responsible for harm done by others is not realism. It is brutality.

The narrow path is harder: condemn without hysteria, understand without excuse, comfort without lying, warn without contempt.

That is the path I am trying to walk.

I do not want to live in a society that mocks victims. I also do not want to live in a society that manufactures future victims by refusing to teach danger. I do not want predatory men excused by biology. I also do not want young women lied to about biology. I do not want politics to hide

crimes. I also do not want crimes reduced to politics. I do not want religious faith to become passivity. I also do not want armed strength without moral restraint.

The task is not to choose between compassion and truth.

The task is to recover the kind of compassion that can survive truth.

XVIII. What “Intelligent Choices” Means

The phrase “an intelligent individual making the right choices” needs definition.

By intelligence, I do not mean IQ. Some very high-IQ people make catastrophic moral and practical decisions. Some people with modest formal education possess deep survival wisdom. Intelligence here means contact with reality. It means the capacity to notice danger before ideology edits it. It means the ability to feel unease and not immediately explain it away. It means judging character, reading incentives, recognizing asymmetry, respecting limits, and understanding that evil often approaches politely.

An intelligent choice may be simple. Do not go alone when isolation is dangerous. Do not enter the private room when secrecy is part of the invitation. Do not accept flattery as proof of safety. Do not trust a person merely because he is powerful. Do not confuse access with honor. Do not confuse attention with love. Do not ignore the first lie. Do not remain after the first serious boundary violation. Do not let politeness overpower fear. Do not assume a declared enemy has become harmless because you wish peace. Do not board the overloaded boat. Do not build policy on emotional slogans. Do not surrender your doubts to the crowd.

These sentences sound obvious. But many tragedies begin with the refusal to honor obvious sentences.

Modern sophistication often consists of talking oneself out of common sense.

And yet common sense, humble as it is, may sometimes be the last guard standing between freedom and disaster.

XIX. The Moral Use of Fear

Fear has a bad reputation. We speak of overcoming fear, refusing fear, transcending fear, not living in fear. Much of that is noble. A person ruled by fear cannot live fully. A nation ruled only by fear can become cruel. A child raised only in fear may never become free.

But fear also has a moral use.

Fear is one of the ways reality enters the body. It tells us that something may be wrong before our ideology has prepared an explanation. Fear is not always accurate. It may be distorted by trauma, prejudice, or imagination. But it should not be automatically dismissed. Sometimes the refusal to feel fear is not courage. Sometimes it is vanity.

Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is the disciplined use of fear in service of life and duty.

Defiance requires fear. A man who does not understand danger cannot defy evil; he can only wander into it. My father in the Gulag, my mother surviving under Soviet pressure, my brother becoming adult at seven — their defiance was not built on denial. It was built on full knowledge of danger and refusal to collapse before it.

That is the kind of fear worth teaching: not neurotic fear, not hatred, not paranoia, but sober fear. The fear that locks the door, questions the private invitation, refuses the second drink, checks the exit, distrusts secrecy, avoids the isolated place, respects the border, refuses the overloaded boat, carries the sword, and still remains capable of love.

A person without fear may look free.

He may simply be unprotected.

XX. Before Harm and After Harm

Timing matters.

Everything I have said so far concerns prevention. After harm occurs, the moral atmosphere changes. The wounded person does not need a lecture. The assaulted woman does not need a seminar on prudence before she receives compassion. The abused child does not need analysis before protection. The hostage does not need geopolitical explanation while he is trying to survive. The survivor needs safety, tenderness, justice, and time.

There is a moral sequence.

First protect. Then comfort. Then punish the perpetrator. Then investigate the failures. Then teach the living.

A society that begins by interrogating the victim is cruel. A society that never investigates preventability is irresponsible. Both failures create future harm.

This is why the phrase “victim blaming” is sometimes necessary and sometimes destructive. When it stops humiliation of the wounded, it is necessary. When it forbids prevention for the living, it is destructive.

The difference is not always easy to maintain. Tone matters. Timing matters. Compassion matters. But tone cannot become an excuse for silence, and compassion cannot become a substitute for truth.

The wounded should not be made to carry the burden of our lessons before they are safe.

But the living must not refuse the lessons because they are painful.

XXI. Restating the Thesis

My original proposition is difficult: many cases of abuse can be avoided or minimized in consequence by an intelligent individual making the right choices.

I would state it now with sharper boundaries.

In many adult situations where meaningful choice still exists before coercion closes in, abuse is not random lightning. It often has a structure, a setting, a sequence, and warning signs. An intelligent individual — supported by honest family, moral formation, institutional courage, and public order — can often avoid the gate before it becomes a trap. But where childhood, captivity, state terror, sudden violence, coercive dependency, or overwhelming force removes meaningful choice, the victim’s responsibility shrinks or disappears, and the burden shifts to perpetrators, institutions, and society.

This formulation does not weaken the argument. It makes it morally usable.

It refuses cruelty toward victims. It also refuses stupidity before danger. It allows us to speak about sexual assault without pretending biology is fiction. It allows us to speak about Epstein without reducing the case to politics. It allows us to speak about Central Park without denying public safety. It allows us to speak about private rooms without equating voluntary entry with consent. It allows us to speak about shipwrecks and borders without pretending compassion suspends limits. It allows us to speak about October 7 without blaming the murdered or silencing questions about readiness.

The moral balance is not easy, but it is necessary.

We do not blame the victim.

We study how not to become one.

Conclusion: Refusing to Produce the Next Victim

The great danger is that a phrase meant to protect victims may end up protecting future perpetrators.

“Do not blame the victim” is morally right when it means: do not transfer guilt from the attacker to the attacked. But it becomes morally wrong when it means: do not ask what could have prevented the harm. In that form, it protects unsafe parks, predatory rooms, elite networks, weak institutions, ideological blindness, open borders without structure, families afraid to warn, and cultures that confuse kindness with denial.

A society serious about preventing abuse must be willing to ask hard questions before tragedy. If it waits until afterward, those questions become crueler, because now they must be asked over ruins.

The aim is not to stand over the wounded and say, “Why did you make that choice?”

The aim is to stand beside the living and say, “Make the choice now, while you still can.”

This is not blaming the victim. It is refusing to produce the next one.

And perhaps this is where defiance returns in its deepest form. Defiance is not only fighting evil after it arrives. It is refusing the pleasant language that made evil easier to ignore before it arrived. It is refusing to let rights replace prudence, compassion replace limits, intelligence replace morality, biology replace responsibility, or innocence replace protection.

A civilization that loves its people does not merely comfort them after harm.

It teaches them how to remain free before harm comes.