

DECEMBER 24, 2012

Parashat Vayechi

The Greatest Pain

I had not thought to see your face (Genesis 48:11)

ראה פניך לא פללתי (בראשית מז:יא)

The story of Joseph offers a glimpse into the terrible anguish of losing a child. As the brothers presented Joseph's torn and bloodied coat to Jacob, he assumed that his son had been killed by a wild beast and he mourned terribly for him. "All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said: 'No, but I will go down to the grave to my son mourning.' And his father wept for [Joseph]" (37:35). The Talmud (Berachot 5a) teaches that the suffering for the loss of the child is so great that it atones "for all of one's sins."

Jacob's pain from the loss of his beloved son resonates strongly as we reel from the heart wrenching shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. After the deadly incident our Israeli friends were quick to express their sympathies.

Following the terrible rampage at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut people from across the country mourned for the innocent victims. And, even across the Atlantic, Israelis grieved with us as we experienced one of the worst mass shootings in American history. Israeli President Shimon Peres sent a [letter](#) to President Obama expressing his condolences. "On behalf of the people of Israel, as friends and as parents, we stand with you today in contemplation and grief over the atrocious, incomprehensible massacre of 20 children and six adults." His letter stated. "No experience with death can be likened to that of a parents' loss of their child. No crime is more heinous than the killing of a child. Our hearts are with the bereaved families of the victims, the mourning community in Newtown, Connecticut and the people of the United States of America." Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [wrote](#), "I was shocked and horrified by [the] savage massacre of innocent children and adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary School." He conveyed his "deepest condolences" and wishes for "the American people [to] find the strength to overcome this unspeakable tragedy." Former Israel Opposition leader Tzipi Livni also sent Secretary of State Hillary Clinton a [letter](#) of condolence. "Senseless violence has shown its ugliest face, since it struck at civilized society's most vulnerable spot, our young children." She added, "On this fateful day when tragedy struck at the good people of Newtown, I grieve, along with my fellow Israelis...Our hearts go out to the families of the victims."

As the United States grapples with the horrific tragedy of Newtown, Connecticut, the people of Israel offer condolences for the families who, like Jacob, are forced to bear the unspeakable loss of their beautiful children. ■

Dangerous Weapons

Weapons of violence their kinship (Genesis 49:5)

כלי חמס מכרתיהם (בראשית מט:ה)

According to the Torah, Jacob delivered a final message to each of his sons. When addressing Simeon and Levi, he did not mince his words. "In their anger they slew men, and in their self-will they uprooted oxen; Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath, for it was cruel" (49:6). Rashi (on 49:5) explains that Jacob expressed outrage at his sons' proclivity for violence and at the weapons they used against the people of Shechem. To combat their militaristic tendency, he said "I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel." Jacob understood that he could only prevent another future violent outburst by distancing these sons (and their descendant tribes) from each-other.

By separating Simeon and Levi, Jacob highlighted the danger of deadly weapons in the wrong hands. Today, that danger looms large as terrorists eye Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons.

As Syrian President Bashar Assad's hold on power weakens, U.S. officials are increasingly worried that Syria's weapons of mass destruction could fall into the hands of Islamist extremists, rogue generals or other uncontrollable factions. [Reuters](#) reported that the rise of al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, al-Nusra Front, which the U.S. recently designated as a terrorist organization, could usher in a long and deadly confrontation with the West and Syria's neighbors. "For the first time al-Qaeda is within striking distance of Israel," a Syrian opposition figure said. Nusra members are estimated to number in the thousands. Around Damascus they remain potent and are only 12 miles at some points from the Golan Heights front with Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [described](#) the common threats that Israel and the United States face from Syria. "We're monitoring very closely the possibility of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. President Obama has spoken forcefully about this. Israel and the United States have close consultations about this issue and it highlights the dangers of these regimes receiving such weapons, and that these weapons can even go from there to terrorist organizations." According to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, the Pentagon has drawn up plans for responding to scenarios involving Syria's chemical arms, and defense officials are working closely with Israel, Jordan and NATO allies to monitor suspected Syrian chemical arms sites and to coordinate options to intervene if necessary. For more on Syria, click [here](#).

Just as Jacob took action and separated Levi and Simeon to prevent them from bringing harm to others, the international community must take action to ensure that Syria's deadly cache of chemical weapons do not fall into the hands of terrorists. ■

A True Friend

And the Egyptians wept for him (Genesis 50:3)

ויבכו אתו מצרים (בראשית נ:ג)

The Torah notes that as Joseph and his brothers mourned the death of their father, the people of Egypt mourned along with them for 70 days. While Radak (on 50:3) suggests that the Egyptians mourned out of respect for Joseph, Rashi, quoting the Midrash, explains that their mourning was not honorific or symbolic, but genuine. The Midrash (Midrash Hachefetz on 47:7) states that Jacob's arrival in Egypt brought two specific blessings. His arrival shortened the famine by two years, and his presence miraculously caused the Nile River to rise and irrigate Egypt's crops. Out of respect and thanks for the blessings he brought with him to their country, the citizens of Egypt mourned his passing.

The people of Egypt honored Jacob for the great blessings he brought to their country. Today the people of Israel mourn the passing an American hero who was also a great friend of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii was a great legislator, leader and war hero as well as a leading figure who worked tirelessly to strengthen the ties between the United States and Israel. While recovering in a hospital from injuries sustained during a battle in World War II, Inouye heard from a fellow patient about the bodies he discovered in ovens at a camp liberated by U.S. forces. He asked his fellow patient what their crime could have been. When he was told "they were Jews," the answer changed his life, [JTA](#) reported. Inouye was a lead sponsor of the legislation in the mid-1990s that recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and his role as a lead appropriator helped guarantee U.S. defense assistance to Israel. "Our people owe him an immense historic debt," said Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren. "The Iron Dome system that recently intercepted hundreds of terrorist rockets aimed at our homes stands as enduring proof of his commitment to the defense of the Jewish state." U.S. security assistance to Israel is the most tangible manifestation of American support and we must continue to educate our elected officials so that they, like Senator Inouye, will continue to support the state of Israel. For more on the U.S.-Israel relationship, click [here](#).

Like Jacob, who brought blessing and prosperity to the people of Egypt, Senator Daniel Inouye worked to bring strength, safety and security to the people of Israel. ■

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