

DECEMBER 29, 2014

## Parashat Vayechi

### Seeing the Signs of Anti-Semitism

And Jacob lived (Genesis 47:28)

ויחי יעקב (בראשית מז:כח)

Sometimes the strongest messages come from the most unlikely of sources. Danny Cohen, director of television at the BBC, recently made news when he expressed his fears over what he identified as growing level of hostility towards Jews in Britain and other parts of Europe. Speaking at Jerusalem Cinematheque, a conference addressing the ability of comedy to drive forward social change [Cohen said](#), “I’ve never felt so uncomfortable being a Jew in the UK as I’ve felt in the last 12 months. And it’s made me think about, you know, is it our long-term home, actually? Because you feel it. I’ve felt it in a way I’ve never felt before.” Cohen noted that levels of hatred were on the rise all across Europe. “You’ve seen the number of attacks rise, you’ve seen murders in France, you’ve seen murders in Belgium. It’s been pretty grim actually...Having lived all my life in the UK, I’ve never felt as I do now about anti-Semitism in Europe.”

When reading a Torah scroll, we notice that apart from the lack of punctuation of any kind, the text is divided into paragraphs of sorts—both open and closed. Yet, the opening of Parashat Vayechi doesn’t start at a new paragraph. Rather, the reading opens in the middle of a paragraph, in what’s called a *parashah setumah*—“a closed paragraph.” Rashi (verse 28) wonders why the Sages chose to open this week’s reading in the middle of a paragraph. He answers, “For when Jacob our father died, the eyes and hearts of Israel were closed (*nistemu*) because of the affliction of the bondage which [the Egyptians] began to enslave them.” Yet, Rashi’s answer only begs another question: the Jewish people would not be physically enslaved by the Egyptians for over a century. What subjugation did they endure following the death of Jacob? Siftei Chachamim (verse 28 #2) explains that while they were not physically enslaved, they nonetheless suffered the “anguish of subjugation—for Egypt sought to subjugate them” through verbal means. Even when they were not literally enslaved, following Jacob’s death the Jews were degraded, threatened and intimidated.

Today, Jews throughout Europe and other parts of the world are experiencing, by and large, exactly this type of subjugation in the form of threats and intimidation. Speaking at last year’s AIPAC Policy Conference, former British Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks [said that](#), “I have to tell you that what we grew up with, ‘never again,’ is beginning to sound like ‘ever again.’ And at the heart of it is hostility to Israel. Of course, not all criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic. But make no mistake what has happened. In the Middle Ages Jews were hated because of their religion. In the 19th century and the 20th, they were hated because of their race. Today, when it’s no longer done to hate people for their religion or their race, today they are hated because of their state. The reason changes, but the hate stays the same. Anti-Zionism is the new anti-Semitism.”

This past Thursday marked the [10<sup>th</sup> of Tevet](#), originally designated as a minor fast to commemorate the siege of Jerusalem during the First Temple era. In December 1948, Israel’s Chief Rabbinate designated the tenth of Tevet as a day of mourning and communion with Holocaust victims, designating this day as the *yahrzeit* for those who perished whose date of death is unknown. As we honor their memories and recite *Kaddish* on behalf of the victims of the very worst form of anti-Semitism, we must also renew our own commitment to work to ensure that “never again” really does mean “never again.” At the same time, we acknowledge and thank those European leaders, like German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who have [forcefully condemned anti-Semitism](#) in the strongest terms. We, and our allies, must fight it now, before it can grow into an even more dangerous threat to Jews around the world. ■

## Choosing to See the Light

And he comforted them (Genesis 50:21)

וינחם אותם (בראשית נ:כא)

When Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson lit the menorah at the official White House Hanukkah party this year, he used a very unique *hanukkiah*. Last month, a first-grade classroom in Jerusalem's Max Rayne Hand in Hand School, a bilingual school where Jewish and Arab children learn side-by-side, was set on fire in a [November arson attack](#) that was [widely condemned](#) by a broad spectrum of Israeli leaders. In response, at the request of the U.S. embassy in Israel, students at the school built a wooden menorah whose branches represented the values preached by the school, including education, friendship, solidarity and freedom. In his remarks before the lighting, President Obama [noted](#) the presence of, and welcomed, Moran Ibrahim and Inbar Shaked-Vardi, two ninth graders from the school who had travelled to Washington, D.C. for the event. He noted that following the arson attacks, students at the school "could have succumbed to cynicism and anger, but instead they built this menorah..."

Joseph made the very same choice when confronted with a similar challenge. Following the death of Jacob, the brothers feared that Joseph's largesse and kindness stemmed not from his heart, but from a desire not to upset their father. "It may be that Joseph will hate us, and will fully requite [unto] us all the evil which we did unto him." (50:15) When the Joseph's brothers returned together from burying Jacob in Canaan, they send him a message in the name of their father commanding him to forgive them. Joseph "wept when they spoke to him," and responded to their plea for forgiveness by telling them, "Fear not; for am I in the place of God? And as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good...to save many people." (49-50) Rather than seeing the wickedness of their intentions, Joseph chose to look at the larger divine plan which allowed him to save countless lives from starvation.

The Midrash adds another note to this story. After the Exodus, Moses fulfilled Joseph's final request, exhumed his body and escorted it for burial in the Holy Land. (see 50:25) The Midrash (Mechilta Beshalach) comments that during their travels in the desert, the people transported the box containing Joseph's remains next to the Ark of the Covenant, causing people to wonder: "What is the essence of those two boxes?" To this they would answer: "What is in here (Joseph) fulfilled what is in here (the commandments)"...It is written, "You shall not hate your brother" (Leviticus 19:17), and regarding Joseph it is written, "And he comforted them, and spoke kindly unto them." (50:21) Rather than succumb to the temptations of hatred and vengeance, Joseph chose to love his brothers both in heart and deed.

Israel makes this same choice—to act out of love, rather than succumb to hate—on a regular basis. On numerous occasions, Israeli hospitals have [treated relatives of Hamas officials](#) needing medical care. Moreover, [Israeli hospitals routinely offer medical treatment](#) to terrorists who have endangered and killed innocent civilians. How do they do it? Dr. Charles Sprung, director of the general intensive care unit at Hadassah Ein Karem Hospital in Jerusalem, cites the Oath of Maimonides, the famed 12th-century Jewish physician and rabbi, which obligates doctors to "never see in the patient anything but a fellow creature in pain." These dedicated medical professionals—and the country they represent—choose to treat the person in need, and refuse to see anger and hatred.

At the candle lighting ceremony, President Obama emphasized that it was not the menorah itself that was valuable, but rather the message that it symbolized. "Inbar and Moran and their fellow students teach us an important lesson for this time in our history: The light of hope must outlast the fires of hate. That's what the Hanukkah story teaches us. It's what our young people can teach us—that one act of faith can make a miracle, that love is stronger than hate, that peace can triumph over conflict." Joseph undoubtedly would have agreed. ■

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