



Sermon Tidbits

DECEMBER 8, 2014

Parashat Vayeishev

Dashed Hopes

And Jacob dwelled (Genesis 37:1)

וישב יעקב (בראשית לז:א)

Rashi's commentary on the second verse of Vayeishev serves as a fitting description of life in Israel today. Commenting on the verse, "And Jacob dwelled" Rashi (on verse 2) writes, "Jacob sought to dwell in peace. But there sprang upon him the troubles of Joseph." The Sages note the numerous challenges that Jacob faced over the course of his life—his flight from Esau; his struggles with Laban; the capture of Dinah in Shechem. Despite his desire to finally live his life in peace and tranquility, he endures yet another calamity in the loss of his beloved Joseph.

Like Jacob, who yearned to live in peace, Israel has taken concrete steps, to create a framework for peace with the Palestinians. Still, Israel finds itself stymied by a concerted campaign of Palestinian incitement to violence.

Two additional stabbings by Palestinian terrorists last week represent the latest in a string of terrorist attacks in the Jewish state over the past six weeks, including the horrifying synagogue attack in which two Palestinian terrorists brutally murdered four Israelis during morning prayers. While Israel has taken steps to try and de-escalate the situation and return calm to the region, the attacks resulted from a concerted campaign of incitement in which the Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas and other Palestinian leaders used vitriolic language to inflame tensions, especially over the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Abbas has condoned terrorism, labeling a driver who plowed his car into a crowd waiting for a light-rail train a "[martyr](#)," he has called on Palestinians to prevent Israeli "settlers" from entering the Temple Mount "by any means" and Fatah and the PA [published a series of cartoons](#) praising and advocating car-ramming attacks on Jews. Following the synagogue murders, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry [called](#) on the Palestinian leadership to take action to de-escalate the situation, saying that the PA "must begin to take serious steps to restrain any kind of incitement that comes from their language, from other people's language, and exhibit the kind of leadership that is necessary to put this region on a different path."

Just as Jacob wished to live in peace, Israel wishes to live in peace with its Palestinian neighbors. Yet, like Jacob, Israel continues to suffer from violent, vitriolic verbal attacks that ultimately lead to deadly acts of terror. ■

The Seeds of Democracy

Shall you indeed reign over us (Genesis 37:8)

המלך תמלך עלינו (בראשית לז:ח)

When Joseph's brothers rebuff his dream that portends his domination over them, they respond with two questions: "Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?" (verse 8). What is the difference between to "reign" (*timloch*) and to have "dominion" (*timshol*)? Ibn Ezra explains that the former implies that "we will place you over us as a king" while the latter means that "you will dominate us by force." Jewish kings were never intended to rule by force. Rather, as the verse in Deuteronomy states, "You shall place a king over you" (17:15). Our leaders, who were always chosen with the assent of the people, worked to further the nation's needs and interests.

Ibn Ezra's comments note the democratic roots of Jewish leadership even in biblical times. Today, the United States and Israel share a common commitment to the democratic value of respecting and fulfilling the will of the people.

When the Israeli Knesset voted last week to disband and set elections for March of 2015, Israel once again demonstrated its commitment to democracy and their core value that government must be duly elected by all its citizens. In fact, since the birth of the Jewish state sixty-six years ago, Israel's liberal democracy has been rooted in liberty, the rule of law, free and fair elections and complete voting rights for all. Like the United States, Israeli law, as enshrined in its Declaration of Independence guarantees "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex." Israel guarantees freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion, and unlike any other country in the region, Israel provides full rights to women, who participate in all aspects of social and political life.

Across the political spectrum, the people of the United States have seen in Israel a kindred spirit that shares America's fundamental commitment to democracy, the rule of law, freedoms of speech, press, religion and the rights of women. America's identification with Israel has been regularly reflected in polls showing overwhelming support among Americans for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. To the American people, Israel's devotion to liberty is all the more remarkable given Israel's neighborhood—in which many regimes deny their populations the most basic rights and actively support terrorism. And, according to Ibn Ezra, the values our two countries share are rooted in the model of Jewish leadership described in the Torah. ■

Acting with the Passion of a Full Heart

And Reuben heard it... (Genesis 37:21)

וישמע ראובן (בראשית לז:כא)

After he passed away suddenly last month at the age of 48 early last month, Keith Berman was remembered fondly as a passionate Israel advocate who devoted his life to sharing his love for Israel with American Jewish youth. A native of Florida, Berman fell in love with Israel when he took part in one of Young Judea's Year Course programs. After making aliyah to Israel in 1988, Berman served in the IDF's Nahal brigade and later worked as a senior leader in the Young Judea Zionist movement before founding [Aardvark](#). Aardvark is a gap-year program which provided an accredited study abroad experience for Jewish students from all around the world under the auspices of Masa. "He became the epitome of the young Zionist. He was an ardent lover of Israel, a tremendously committed person to the Jewish people and his goal in life became to bring young people to Israel for period of time longer than birthright's ten days," said [Dr. Harold Goldmeier](#), an instructor employed by Aardvark. Simon Cohen, a cofounder of Aardvark [noted](#) that, "He [Berman] has affected the lives of tens of thousands of people; he dedicated his entire life to Israel and to bringing young Jewish people to Israel. Today, Israel is a better country thanks to him." (To learn more about Keith's life and hear a full interview with him recorded last year, click [here](#).)

Learning of his brothers' vengeful plot to kill Joseph, Reuben rejects the plan out of hand, instead suggesting that they "cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness" (verse 21). Reuben made this suggestion with the intention of rescuing Joseph later and returning him to his father. Tragically, before he could follow through on his plan to rescue Joseph, the brothers raise Joseph from the pit and sell him into slavery. The Midrash notes that if Reuben had realized that his actions were being recorded for posterity, he would have acted differently. "Said Rabbi Yitzchak bar Marion: The verse teaches us that a person should always [completely] fulfill a mitzvah with a full heart, for had he known that the text would write about him 'And Reuben heard it, and delivered him out of their hand' he would [not have waited, but would] have lifted [Joseph] on his shoulders and carried him to his father." (Rut Rabbah 5)

When we perform mitzvot, we must try to not only act with the best of intentions, but to follow through on those positive intentions with the passion of a full heart. How much more powerful and effective would our support for Israel be if we acted as if our actions were being recorded for posterity? Keith Berman lived his life with that passion, sharing the power of Israel with a full heart. Today, he is remembered by friends, co-workers, and the people he taught whose lives he changed forever. While our actions might not be written in the Torah, we must strive nonetheless to emulate Keith Berman's shining example, to share and spread our passion, dedication and love for the Jewish state. ■

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