



Sermon Tidbits

NOVEMBER 30, 2015

Parashat Vayeshev - Hanukkah

Countering Hatred with Love

Go see whether it is well with your brothers (Genesis 37:14) (לך נא ראה את שלום אחיך (בראשית לו:יד))

When Imam Abdul Rahman Ahmad, Imam of the Mosque of Sharon, Massachusetts, learned of the brutal murder of fellow Sharon resident Ezra Schwartz during a terrorist attack in Jerusalem, he sent the Schwartz family a letter of condolence widely shared through social media. Among his [words of consolation](#), “The Islamic community at Sharon has always categorically condemned such violent acts based on our firm belief that Islam enjoins us to be a people who bring peace and harmony to the world.” Among a storm of negativity and hatred spread through social networks today, Imam Ahmad’s letter represented a ray of hope that a message of love and support could shine through during a time of difficulty and darkness.

In *Parashat Vayeshev*, our forefather Jacob finds his household in disarray as the forces of hatred and jealousy threaten to tear the fabric of his family apart. Joseph’s grandiose dreams, and his willingness to openly share them, so irked his brothers that, “they hated him, and could not speak peaceably about him.” (37:4) Knowing how much his older sons hated their younger brother and his proclivity to tattle on them, (see 37:2) many commentaries wonder how Jacob could send Joseph on a mission to Shechem to report back on their well-being. Did he not realize how dangerous this mission might be given the brothers’ animosity towards Joseph? According to Rabbi Avraham Rivlin, Jacob indeed recognized their animosity for Joseph. Yet, he hoped that the mission would, rather than drive the brothers apart, bring them closer together. He writes that Jacob instructed Joseph to overlook their hatred for him and see the positive within them instead. “When Jacob sent Joseph ‘from the valley of Hebron’—‘from the depth of the advice of the *tzaddik* buried in Hebron’ (i.e. Abraham - see Rashi on 37:14), his goal was clear and quantified: ‘Go see whether it is well with (literally ‘the peace of’) your brothers.’ (37:14) In the works of Hassidic thought it is taught that the simple meaning is that now, as opposed to the shortcomings that Joseph found in his brothers to this point, and as an atonement for the slander that he spoke about them in the past, now he was tasked to see ‘their peace’—how they fared, and the positive within them. In contrast to the haughtiness and baseless hatred which caused jealousy and discord, Joseph’s father asks him to bring peace to the house, and baseless love between brothers.”

Much has been said and written about the “[Instafada](#)” currently being waged over social media inciting Palestinians to commit so-called “lone wolf” acts of violence against innocent Israelis. Thousands of posts and shares encourage acts of violence and offer instruction on how to kill Israelis most effectively. According to Prof. Boaz Ganor, the founder and executive director of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, these social media posts also [glorify those who have already committed violence](#) as martyrs and heroes, thereby reinforcing the cycle of violence and encouraging others to follow suit. Time Magazine notes, “The outbreak of stabbing attacks...appears to have its roots in the virtual realm. Palestinian social media is teeming with slogans, memes, videos, and other shareable propaganda urging young people to take up arms—specifically knives—against their perceived oppressors.”

Yet, with all of these dangers, social media outlets also present an opportunity. Tehilla Shwartz-Altshuler, a social media expert with the Israel Democracy Institute [explained](#) that just as radicals are using Facebook and Instagram to spread hate, Israel could use the social media networks to highlight Israeli-Palestinian unity. “If [violent incitement] is a social engineering phenomenon then you can do reverse social engineering and show Jews and Arab people working together in hospitals, university, posting together,” she argues. “Sometimes it’s easy to talk about social media

becoming a ground for terror but it can also be a ground for peace.” Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook famously explained that the just as the Jewish nation was destroyed due to baseless hatred, the Jewish nation will be rebuilt together with the world through baseless love.” (Orot Hakodesh 3:324) We must use the tools we have to spread Israel’s true desire for peace, and the many efforts both [in Israel](#) and [around the world](#) to bridge the gap between Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians. When Palestinian children get the message that Muslims in America do not support terrorism, and rather than consider them martyrs, they brand them as terrorists and criminals, they will begin to think twice before deciding to end their own lives in a futile, pointless and destructive terrorist attack. ■

A Nation of Miracles...and Hard Work

On the miracles (Hanukkah prayer)

על הניסים (תפילה של חנוכה)

In 1980, during the waning seconds of United States Men’s hockey team’s incredible victory over the Soviet Union, television announcer Al Michael asked and answered a question that would forever be etched in the minds of American sports fans: “Do you believe in miracles?... Yes!” To this day, that victory is still called the “Miracle on Ice,” as a small band of college kids somehow vanquished the mighty Soviet sports machine. In truth, most Americans do believe in miracles—especially Jewish Americans, who proudly display their faith in the miracle of the small cruse of oil that transpired in the Temple in Jerusalem so many centuries ago. In fact, many of the customs and laws surrounding the lighting of the candles on Hanukkah—from the time of the lighting to the placement of the candles—are based on the principle of *pirsumei nisa*—“popularizing the miracle”—of Hanukkah.

Yet, the focus on miracles also lies in the face of a very different Jewish tradition. The Talmud taught that, “A person should never stand in a dangerous place and say that a miracle will take place which will save him, for perhaps a miracle will not occur (and he will not be saved)” (Talmud Shabbat 32a). The rule, *ein somchin al hanes*—“we do not rely on miracles,” enjoins us from engaging in dangerous behavior armed only with the belief that God will miraculously save us because for most of us—God won’t. How then do we reconcile our traditional refusal to rely on miracles with the special emphasis on miracles embedded into the fabric of Hanukkah? The answer lies in our realization that not one miracle occurred in the Hanukkah story, but two.

While most of us generally emphasize the miracle of the Menorah in the Temple, before that miracle could even be possible, the Jews needed a different, far more “mundane” miracle which we recount in the special *al hanisim* prayer added to both the daily Amidah and the Birkat Hamazon. In this prayer, we give special thanks to God for the military victory during which God, “stood by [the Hasmoneans] in the time of their distress... waged their battles, defended their rights, and avenged the wrong done to them. You [God] delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous...” While we call the military victory a “miracle,” the Maccabees, rather than waiting for a miraculous salvation from heaven, made the necessary effort to rise up and defend themselves against their Greek oppressors and make the Hanukkah miracle possible. Both Hanukkah miracles—the military victory and the wondrous oil—occurred after the Jews refused to rely on a miracle, and fought for their freedom.

Today, no objective observer can look at the modern marvel of the Jewish state and consider it anything less than miraculous. Surrounded on all sides by aggressive enemies bent at its destruction, Israel conquered the desert, rebuffed its enemies, harnesses the power of technology and is now considered a world leader not only in military tactics and self-defense, but in fields as diverse as cyber-security, water conservation and biotechnology. Yet, similar to the story of Hanukkah this modern miracle—as well as the miraculous victories over Israel’s enemies over the past sixty years—were only possible because Israel’s supporters refused to wait passively for a miracle, but instead committed themselves to making one happen. Like the Maccabees did so many years ago, today we do not wait for miracles to save the people of Israel. We work hard to ensure that Israel has the tools it needs to protect and defend her people. But, after all is said and done, we must also look back at our efforts and still quote the letters represented on every dreidel and say, “*Nes Gadol Hayah Sham*”—“a great miracle happened there.” ■