

DECEMBER 14, 2015

Parashat Vayigash

A Spontaneous Response

Then Joseph could not refrain himself (Genesis 45:1)

ולא יכל יוסף להתאפק (בראשית מה:א)

November 19th of this year was difficult for many Americans and Israelis, who learned the distressing and painful news of the senseless murder of American student Ezra Schwartz, who was gunned down in a terrorist attack while on his way to volunteer on behalf of Israeli soldiers. Yet, while most of us shed a tear, said a prayer and moved on, a 19-year-old University of Michigan student, Jesse Arm, spoke up. According to the [Algemeiner Journal](#), “Arm, a Central Student Government (CSG) representative...confronted fellow students who erected on campus two mock 8-by-12-foot walls mimicking the 25-foot security fence separating Israel from the Palestinian Authority...Video footage from the scene shows Arm confronting one of the demonstrators, saying, ‘You want to hold a moment of silence, you ought to take a moment and recognize that if you want peace to ever happen, it’s going to have to happen with people who understand the situation and who are going to be delicate about it...’” While Arm never engaged in violence or inappropriate behavior, “Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE), an anti-Israel group on campus that organized the display...called on the student government’s ethics committee last week to dismiss Arm over the confrontation...claiming that Arm’s conduct was ‘unbecoming of a regular student, let alone a CSG representative.’”

Why did Arm speak up? When members of SAFE called on the CSG to dismiss Arm from the body for what they called “unbecoming conduct,” [Arm defended himself](#) saying that “he acted emotionally because a friend of his was killed in the terrorist attack...Arm said he does not believe in censorship, but does believe in his right to challenge the protesters on behalf of constituents who may feel similarly to him. ‘I felt I questioned the taste, timing and appropriateness of this display.’” Jesse Arm responded to Palestinian propaganda on his campus because he could not remain silent. His words were respectful and appropriate and he could not hold them in any longer. This is precisely what happened to Joseph as well.

Parashat Vayigash opens with Judah’s impassioned plea that Joseph—who has not yet revealed his identity—set free the imprisoned Benjamin and allow him to return home. Judah even offers himself as a slave in place of Benjamin. “I pray that you let your servant remain instead of the lad as a bondman to my lord; and let the lad go up with his brothers.” (44:33) Judah, who had played a major role in the sale of Joseph into slavery, now offers himself as a slave in order to return his brother, Benjamin, to Jacob. It is at this point that Joseph can no longer maintain the charade. “Then Joseph could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him...” (45:1) In Hebrew, the word for “refrain himself” is *l’hitapek*, a word commentaries struggle to interpret. Rashi explains that Joseph could no longer “suffer” with his secret.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of Jesse Arm’s response to the murder of Ezra Schwartz is not that he reacted—but that most of us did not. Jesse, suffering the loss of a friend, could not ignore the promotion of lies and falsehood in the name of murder and terrorism. So he stood up to protestors, and was ultimately [cleared by a student government ethics committee](#) which said that Arm’s action, “encourages students and student government representatives to ‘passionately and respectfully’ advocate for causes they believe in, and that Arm should ‘not be penalized because he is passionate and cares deeply about this issue.’” Did we feel that same pain after Ezra Schwartz’s murder and remain silent? Or did we act, by contacting our elected officials, penning an op-ed in our local paper, or simply sharing our

pain with coworkers or friends? Jesse Arm reminds us that when we feel the pain acutely, we can and must speak out, take action and refute the lies against Israel that promote murder and terrorism instead of peace. ■

Creating Unity by Working Together (Haftarah)

That they may become one in your hand (Ezekiel 37:17)

והיו לאחדים בידיך (יחזקאל לז:יז)

Earlier this month, over one hundred seventy American infantry soldiers stationed in Europe arrived in full gear in Israel to join hundreds of soldiers in Israel's Egoz infantry unit for over a week of joint training. During the exercise, the soldiers practiced basic navigation and infantry training, as well as urban warfare drills, shooting drills and physical fitness training, [Ynet reported](#). "We never identified the enemy we were training against as Hamas or Hezbollah. For us and them terror is terror," an IDF officer said. The joint exercise represents just one of a number of joint training programs between Israeli and other forces. This teamwork between Israel and the United States has been taking place for decades, and represents a critical aspect of the strong partnership between the two countries.

While Parashat Vayigash portrays a partial reconciliation between Judah and Joseph so many years after Judah perpetrated the terrible crime of selling his brother into slavery, in reality, the two brothers represented two branches of the family that would ultimately tear the Jewish nation apart. In the course of time, the Kingdom of Israel split from the Kingdom of Judah, dividing the nation and ultimately leading to the destruction of the ancient country. For this reason, the Haftarah for Vayigash focuses on the ultimate reconciliation between the tribes of Judah and Ephraim, the son of Joseph, who would eventually reunite and work together to redeem the Promised Land. Ezekiel describes a prophecy in which God appears to him and tells him to take two sticks and on one write "For Judah, and for the children of Israel his companions" and on the other stick to write "For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and of all the house of Israel his companions." Then Ezekiel must, "Join them for you one to another into one stick that they may become one in your hand." (Ezekiel 37:17) Radak writes that a miracle occurred and the two sticks transformed into a single stick, demonstrating the future unity of the Children of Israel. Commenting on this unusual requirement that the prophet actualized his prophecy in a tangible, physical manner, Rabbi Baruch Simon explained that unity cannot be accomplished through speeches or even prophecy. Rather, unity is achieved through actions. Ezekiel's action teaches us in order to bring true unity, words are not enough. We must take action to tangibly unite disparate groups into a single unit.

Over time, the United States and Israel have demonstrated the truth of this lesson, demonstrating that the strong working partnership between the two countries has brought them ever closer over the course of time. While joint military exercises represent the most visible aspect of the teamwork between the United States and Israel, not a day goes by without critical American-Israeli military engagement. Joint activities range from phone calls between senior defense officials at the Pentagon and their counterparts in Tel Aviv, to the development of new technology to bolster both militaries. This partnership has also led to the development of critical defense systems including the Iron Dome short range missile defense system that protects Israeli citizens as well as American service men and women, and the longer range Arrow missile defense program.

Late last month, President Obama signed into law the FY 2016 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which includes substantial U.S.-Israel cooperative missile defense funding. Specifically, it authorizes \$474 million for U.S.-Israel cooperative missile and rocket defense programs, as well as \$25 million in research and development funding to develop a new, joint U.S.-Israel anti-tunneling defense program, which could be used to protect Israel and U.S. forces from terrorist attacks. These programs will allow Israel to deploy David's Sling and Arrow-3 batteries to defend against increasingly sophisticated mid-and long-range attacks from regional adversaries, as well as potential ballistic missiles from Iran. These many joint programs combining Israeli technological prowess with American support and encouragement have served not only to strengthen both countries, but also help unite the United States and Israel, two strong allies, even closer together. ■

Sermon tidbits are intended for your use without attribution. Please feel free to use some or all of the material. Although it is not necessary, it is appreciated if copies of sermons or articles that use the ideas presented here are sent to synagogue@aipac.org.