



Sermon Tidbits

NOVEMBER 23, 2015

Parashat Vayishlach

Balancing Fear and Freedom

And Jacob was greatly afraid (Genesis 32:8)

ויירא יעקב מאד (בראשית לב:ח)

On Thursday, November 19, two Israelis were killed and one was wounded in a Palestinian stabbing attack at the Panarama building in South Tel Aviv, just hours later three people, an American, a Palestinian and an Israeli, were killed and many more were wounded in a shooting and car-ramming attack near Gush Etzion junction in the West Bank. Ezra Schwartz, of Sharon, Massachusetts was the American killed that day. Friends of Ezra Schwartz reflected on his short life during the hours following news of the 18-year old's murder. [According to close friend Sarah Salinger](#), Schwartz was the kind of friend who urged others to conquer their fears and experience as much of life as possible. "One time we were at a water park and he dragged me all the way up to the top of this crazy dangerous water slide, I was so mad at him, and never told him how grateful I was that he helped me conquer my fear." While she may have been right to be fearful of dangerous heights, her faith in Schwartz's words helped her to overcome.

Fear can be a powerful motivator, and an important physiological reaction that protects us. Jacob found himself in precisely this situation as he made his way, together with his large family, back towards the Land of Canaan. When messengers relayed that Esau gathered four hundred men to greet Jacob, he could only assume the worst—that Esau intended to fulfill his decades-old vow to murder his brother. Unsurprisingly, "...Jacob was greatly afraid and was distressed." (32:8) The Sages wonder about Jacob's fear, for God explicitly promised Jacob divine protection and guaranteed that he would return safely to his father's home. (See 28:15—"And, behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back into this land...") Abrabanel, in his commentary on the Torah, offers a striking explanation for Jacob's fear that offers important insight for us today. He writes: "Jacob's fear and apprehension did not stem from a weakness in his faith and a doubt in his destiny, for his heart truly believed in God." According to Abrabanel, faith is not acting out of the blind belief that no harm will come despite the danger. Faith lies in taking action despite the fear, and in the face of potential danger, as long as we know that we are following the proper path.

Our fears often prevent us from taking unnecessary and dangerous risks. But legitimate fear can also prevent us from taking critical positive action—be it to change our lives, represent our values, or express our ideals.

Perhaps the most incredible aspect of Israel's response to the recent wave of terror is the great restraint Israel has shown and its determination to balance the very real need for security with the value of freedom and the importance of maintaining an integrated society. Israel's Declaration of Independence explicitly guarantees the rights of religious minorities, and Israel's Knesset has reaffirmed these rights by statute. While in most Middle East countries minority religious groups suffer from persecution and discrimination, in Israel each faith has its own religious council and courts, recognized by law, with jurisdiction over all religious affairs and matters of personal status. Beyond the statutes of law, Israel demonstrates its commitment to these values, as Israelis continue to lead their normal lives while insisting of the rights and freedoms of Israel's Arab population. Despite legitimate fear and concern, [unity happens in Israel](#) every day without fanfare or comment—just as it should.

Today the U.S. and Israel are unified in their loss of Ezra Schwartz, who is said to have had an "unconditional" love for Israel. In a statement to reporters the day after Ezra's murder, the United States administration said, "We were

deeply saddened to learn about the death of Ezra Schwartz, an American citizen from Massachusetts who was murdered in a terrorist attack on Thursday while in Israel to pursue his studies... We extend our deepest condolences to the victim's family, friends and community, as well as the family and friends of the four other people killed in yesterday's tragic events." At this scary time, we should put our fears aside and reflect upon the importance of our work together and on our vital mission to help keep America and Israel safe. ■

A Timeless Model

And he divided the people that were with him (Genesis 32:8) (ויחץ את העם אשר אתו (בראשית לב:ח))

Rabbi Judah Hanasi ("Judah the Prince"), the second-century scholar and the chief redactor of the Mishna, also served as a key leader of the Jewish community during the Roman occupation of Judea. According to the Talmud, (Avodah Zara 10a-b) Rabbi Judah Hanasi developed a trusted relationship with the Roman leader at the time, "Antoninus" (who was either the Emperor Antoninus Pius or Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus). Antoninus would seek out the Jewish sage's counsel on various matters. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah) relates that, "Whenever Rabbi Judah Hanasi would go to meet with the gentile government [of Rome], he would study Parashat Vayishlach." Rabbi Judah, who lived in the period after the Bar Kochba rebellion, represented the interests of the Jewish people before the Roman government. He studied Jacob's model of interaction with Esau (the forefather of Rome) in order to best advocate on behalf of the Jewish people he represented.

Jacob, according to Rashi (on Genesis 32:9), chose a three-pronged approach towards the upcoming confrontation with Esau. "He prepared himself for three things: for a gift, for prayer and for war. For a gift 'So the present passed over before him...' (33:22) For prayer: 'God of my father Abraham...' (32:10) For war: 'Then the camp which is left shall escape...' (32:9)" Menachem Becker, in his work *Parparaot L'torah* (vol. 1 p. 145), suggests that just as Jacob's actions served as a model for ancient Jewish leadership, we must also look to our forefather's example as a model for emulation. "We too today should learn this important chapter from the actions of the father of our nation, on the eve of his fateful meeting with his antagonistic brother. First and foremost, we must grab onto the paved path of Israel throughout the generations, and pray to God who dwells above, requesting compassion and assistance... Together with this, we must also prepare ourselves at the same time 'for a gift and for war.' On one hand, we must do everything possible to appease those who afflict Israel with everything in our hands that we can give to them. At the same time, we prepare with our full force for a military struggle—for the possibility that an enemy may choose the path of war."

Thankfully, the leadership in Israel does emulate, to the best of its ability, Jacob's model of leadership. While the issue of prayer for Israel's safety and security depends on all of us equally, and not just Israel's leaders, the steps the government takes in dealing with its neighbors closely model Jacob's actions. In his remarks before meeting privately with President Obama earlier this month, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [said that](#), "I want to make it clear that we have not given up our hope for peace. We'll never give up the hope for peace. And I remain committed to a vision of peace of two states for two peoples, a demilitarized Palestinian state that recognizes the Jewish state." He then added that, "I don't think that anyone should doubt Israel's determination to defend itself against terror and destruction, and neither should anyone doubt Israel's willingness to make peace with any of its neighbors that genuinely want to achieve peace with us."

On the one hand, Israel will always look to give what it can, and make the necessary sacrifices for peace, even if those sacrifices are difficult and painful. At the same time, should Israel's adversaries choose the path of violence, terror and unrest, Israel will always take the needed steps to protect her people from harm. Our forefather Jacob would have strongly agreed. ■

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